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## Full Edition

KEB Editorial Board

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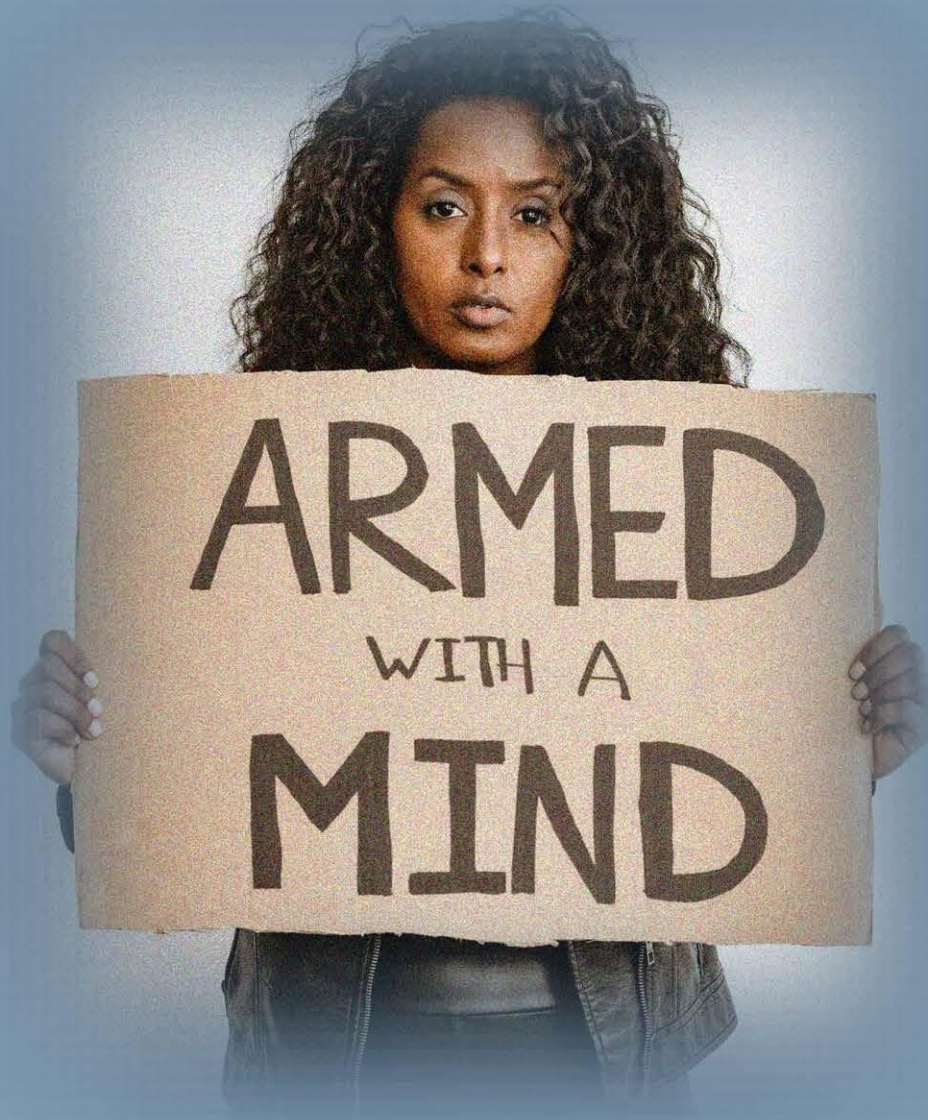
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# *Kentucky English Bulletin*

*A publication of the Kentucky Council of Teachers of English*



*Winter Edition 2021–2022*

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Eve Lee, editorial director

# *Kentucky English Bulletin*

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Winter 2021–2022

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## Letter from the Editors

Greetings!

The end of a calendar year always elicits moments of reflection. In another challenging year, we began to return to in-person events. We returned to our school buildings, full classrooms, and campuses with masks and protocols. There were happy reminders of the electricity that comes with thinking alongside students again and being in the same collaborative space. As is traditional this time each year, we as teachers are all ready for a break for rest, time with loved ones, and a moment to recharge.

This digital issue of *The Kentucky English Bulletin* asked for contributions influenced by the events of summer 2020 and the ways English education intersected with activism, Black Lives Matter, and anti-racist practices. We asked authors to reflect upon how they are opening “the door to larger conversations about truth, justice, activism, healing, and reconciliation” (Pitts, 2017) in their educational spaces. Writers responded with pieces addressing interrogating whiteness as a first-year teacher, using young adult (YA) literature to advocate for survivors of sexual assault trauma, and the original poem “Why Do I Cry?” which serves as a beautiful and poignant reflection on “the issues facing our country,” as the author states. We hope that these pieces will push forward your own thinking and reflection at the close of 2021.

As an editorial team, we look forward to 2022 and bringing you three more issues of *KEB*. Please consider submitting a manuscript! We want to hear and share the brilliance taking place in your classrooms and with your students.

Sending you warm wishes,

Warmly,

*The Kentucky English Bulletin* Editorial Board

Mary Ann Cahill, Ed.D.

Caitlin Murphy, Ph.D.

Winn Crenshaw Wheeler, Ph.D.

*Bellarmino University*

## ***Kentucky English Bulletin* Call for Manuscripts Theme: “Emerging”**

As we emerge from the pandemic, it is our hope that the myriad learning opportunities that took place during the last year will not be lost. Teachers were pushed to try new technologies and platforms, examine inventive ways to maintain motivation and guidance, and ultimately piece together a curriculum and pedagogy that in many ways were new. In some cases, we found ourselves in the midst of not only doing “different,” but sometimes also “better.”

The pandemic tested historical ideas about pedagogy, student attendance, the role of testing, funding, technology, and the continued importance of human connection and relationships. However, in contrast to the idea of just putting the pandemic behind us, we would like to hear about what teachers have learned. What ideas germinated while the world stood still for a moment? How have teachers and teaching evolved?

**Deadline: February 1, 2021 (extended)**

**In addition to articles, contributions are sought for standing sections of the *Bulletin*:**

- Teachers as Writers: Poetry, Essays, Letters
- *KEB* Teaching Strategy Exchange
- Professional Reading Recommendations
- Humor
- What’s New in Young Adult Literature?
- Speak Out: Professional Issues

**Inquiries and drafts are welcome. Contact:**

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### **Submission Guidelines**

- **All submissions are to be uploaded in Submittable using this link: [KEB Submissions](#).**
- *The Bulletin* observes MLA documentation style and NCTE’s position on avoiding sexism in language. Articles from 500 to 2500 words welcome!
- Please See Revised Submission Guidelines/*KEB* Editorial Policy [HERE](#).

A *Kentucky English Bulletin* subscription is included in KCTE/LA membership dues (\$30), which should be sent to:

Patti Slagle, [slagerman@twc.com](mailto:slagerman@twc.com), 312 Winton Ave., Louisville, KY 40206.

## The Kentucky Council of Teachers of English/Language Arts Writing Contest

Please support the efforts of KCTE/LA in recognizing the exceptional writing of your Kentucky students!

We are pleased to announce that we have modified our Writing Contest with the following details:

- Elementary Level has now been split into Primary (grades K–2) and Intermediate (grades 3–5)
- Middle School is now grades 6–8.
- Multimodal Composition is now a category for all grades.

Multimodal compositions can be submitted as a variety of file types or a link to a video published online and include any compositions that incorporate two or more modes of creation, such as video, text, sound, voiceover, photographs (found or original), music, etc.

Be sure that all outside sources, including images and music, are properly cited.

If you are in a middle school with grade 5, you should choose Intermediate for your entry grade level.

**New!!** Teachers with a first-place winner in any category will receive a \$25 gift card and free KCTE/LA membership for the year. Please note this when you register for the annual conference.

### WHAT IS THE KCTE/LA WRITING CONTEST?

KCTE/LA sponsors a writing contest at the Elementary (Primary K–2/Intermediate 3–5), Middle (6–8), High School, and College levels with winners in first through fifth place in the following categories:

- Narrative/Real or Imagined
- Informative/Explanatory
- Opinion/Argumentative
- Poetry
- Multimodal Composition (new for 2020)

### WHO CAN SUBMIT STUDENT WRITING?

Submissions can be entered by any current member of KCTE (email [membership@kcte.org](mailto:membership@kcte.org) to check membership status)

### WHEN CAN A TEACHER BEGIN SUBMITTING ENTRIES?

Submissions will be accepted electronically through May 31, 2022.

### WHEN WILL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS BE NOTIFIED OF WINNING ENTRIES?

Teachers will be notified by September 30. The first, second, and third place winners will be published in the Student Writing Edition of the *Kentucky English Bulletin*, our academic journal. Each winning teacher and student will receive a printed copy of this journal.

### GENERAL GUIDELINES:

Teachers may submit up to three (3) total student entries in each of the categories (for example, one middle school teacher may submit three student entries in the Narrative category, three entries in the Poetry category, and so on).

**Remember:** Teachers who submit more than three entries per category will be disqualified and all entries from the teacher will be disqualified.



## SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:

Please read and follow the Submission Instructions carefully. Failure to comply with instructions will disqualify the entry.

- Entries must be submitted as a Word document through the [KCTE/LA Contest link](#). **SEE NOTE BELOW on HOW the DOCUMENT SHOULD BE TITLED.**
- Each piece, including poems by the same author, should be submitted separately
- Teacher submitting the entry responsible for plagiarism checks and for ensuring students under the age of 18 have proper release forms on file (meaning that you have acquired and have on file student and parent permission to enter and publish this piece).

**NOTE:** For multimodal compositions, the preferred format is a link to a video file. However, if you have a photo, PDF, or mp4 file, it can be uploaded to the submission form. Be sure that the file can be opened and accessed publicly; if we cannot open it, we cannot judge it.

**ALL entrants MUST follow the guidelines below to TITLE & SAVE each entry (Word doc. or docx.).**



**Additionally, the following information should either be on a cover page or ON the first page of the entry itself:**

- Student's Name:
- Student's Grade:
- Submission Category:
- Title of Submission:
- Teacher's Name:
- Name of School:
- Address of School:
- Date of Submission:

**Questions should be addressed to:**

- Elementary Contest Chair – Carol Withrow ([elementary@kcte.org](mailto:elementary@kcte.org))
- Middle-School Contest Chair – Sabrina Tackett ([middlevp@kcte.org](mailto:middlevp@kcte.org))
- High-School Contest Chair – Sarah Webster ([sarah.webster@gallatin.kyschools.us](mailto:sarah.webster@gallatin.kyschools.us))
- College Contest Chair – Eileen Shanahan ([eileen.shanahan@eku.edu](mailto:eileen.shanahan@eku.edu))

## Why Do I Cry? *Synthia Shelby*

It's cold this morning  
Time to work out  
Time to walk  
The neighborhood  
Or maybe the park  
I reach for my hoodie  
And FREEZE.  
My usual routine  
Has now turned to  
Anxiety, fear, trepidation,  
Concern, doubt, frustration,  
Anger, and rage.

Why should I go through  
All of these feelings  
Just because I want to  
Enjoy the rising sun,  
Bask in the day's beauty,  
Simply BREATHE.  
Why should I experience  
The Trauma of my race  
Day after day  
Why should I worry  
If I or people  
Who look like me  
Make it back home  
From a walk, a run,  
Or trip to the grocery store?  
Why should I be concerned  
About sleeping in my bed  
Or attempting to enter  
My home?

It is due to  
The fragility  
Of Beckys and Karens  
Fearing for their lives.  
Of others who say  
I fit the description.  
Of the countless  
Cases of rogue cops  
Who go free

After they  
Assassinate me.  
Our lifeless  
Bodies swinging  
From trees,  
Of justice denied  
And no racial equality.  
Instead my  
Heart bleeds.  
Others fear ME  
Because of my  
Beautiful melanin

I cry today  
For myself and others  
As I lace up my shoes  
And put on my hood.  
On top of that anxiety  
I may even put on  
My mask when someone  
Approaches trying  
To protect them from this  
Unknown, killer – COVID19  
But, it's ME they see  
As a thug,  
As a killer,  
As a threat,  
A terrorist,  
As something  
To be eliminated.

I don't have the  
Option to opt out.  
This is my reality.  
This is my life.  
If you don't live  
In my skin  
Don't tell me  
How I feel within.  
Even when I  
Turn the TV off  
There's still a heavy  
Weight on my soul.  
I'm just plain tired  
Tired, EXHAUSTED,  
Of people NOT

Listening to our  
Collective Truth!

Why do I talk  
About it?  
Why do I cry?  
Because I need  
You to know  
To really listen  
And DO something!  
YOUR silence  
Is deafening.  
Because I'm  
Burdened by  
Carrying this weight  
Every single day.  
Everywhere I go.

I'm trying to  
Keep my sisters  
And brothers  
From going through  
Death's door due  
To hatred, fear,  
Unnecessary force,  
Systemic racism,  
Desensitized hearts  
And others turning a  
Blind eye to the issues.  
I'm trying to remind myself  
And others that our lives,  
Our voices, and our history  
Have value.

So, in spite of all this  
I lace up my shoes  
I put on my hood  
I pray and I go  
To greet the sun,  
Laying fear down  
For a moment.  
I pick up  
The audacity  
Of Hope,  
The voice

Of Courage and  
A Warrior's Boldness.

I won't let  
Prejudice,  
Hate,  
Bullying,  
Racism,  
Or  
Fear  
Turn me around.  
Today  
Is a good day  
To let those that  
Try to erase us  
Know that they  
Will never ever win.

*Synthia Shelby loves to share her trials and triumphs through her writing. She tells her journey through her words and actions. Cynthia motivates, inspires, and empowers others so they can press towards their dreams. She serves her community as an educational leader, author, spoken word artist, and workshop facilitator.*



## **Advocating for Trauma Victims Through Young Adult Literature** ***Zoe Mihalicz, Breea Hornback, Bethany Womack, Klaire Compton***

*The summer before my junior year of high school, I was sexually assaulted. This experience changed my life forever. I lost friends. I went from making good grades to barely passing. And I slipped into severe depression. But one day, in my junior year advanced English class, my teacher took us to the library to pick out a novel. I never cared for reading until I found *Speak* by Laurie R. King Anderson. The novel's protagonist, Melinda Sordina, was sexually assaulted at a party—a situation almost identical to mine. Reading about an adolescent going through a similar experience helped me to understand that I was not alone as a sexual assault victim in high school. *Speak* taught me how to heal and how to advocate for myself and for my peers, who may be dealing with similar experiences.*

Discussing traumatic incidents may feel uncomfortable for teachers and students. It may feel safer to keep these topics silenced and internalized in order to avoid difficult conversations. Yet, each day, students walk into classrooms carrying the physical and emotional burdens from these life-changing experiences, necessitating these conversations within and outside of the classroom. In a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey conducted in 2019, 23.9% of Kentucky high school students experienced in-school bullying, and 8.6% reported sexual violence (“Adolescent and School Health”). Resources like media blogs and platforms, as well as school counselors and school

psychologists, are increasingly available for students (Mullen et al. 3). In order to put a greater focus towards the well-being of students, certain principals believe school counselors must have resources that shift their focus from administrative duties to proactively focusing on the “social-emotional, mental, and behavioral health services” students need (“School Counselors and Principals”). Despite the gains in access to these resources, students often remain reticent to seek out and access these modes of support. The English classroom is one place where difficult but necessary topics are already discussed through reading and writing. Young Adult (YA) texts, such as *Speak*, can be vehicles for normalizing conversations about traumatic experiences, validating students’ personal experiences and feelings (Hinton and Berry 285).

In addition to YA literature’s ability to address sexual assault, its inclusion of characters from multiple races, classes, geographic regions, genders, and sexual identities, reaches out to historically marginalized students facing prejudice and discrimination. In “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop argues that literature “transforms human experience and reflects it back to us . . . . Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (1). YA texts that draw upon multicultural experiences give adolescent readers the opportunity to see familiar experiences reflected through characters in literature, while diverse characters provide perspectives on relationships between these experiences across cultures, regions, and identities (Hinton and Berry 287; Durand). When we focus on “not only inviting a range of stories into our classrooms, but also being open to being changed by these stories,” we acknowledge that, while there are instances that students can relate to others and their hardships, there are also times they do not. In these instances, students are learning about hardships from the perspective of their peers (Frederickson 63). Selecting texts pertaining to students’ lives and interests exposes them to perspectives on traumatic events that they might not have

considered previously and validates these experiences (Frederickson 60).

Validation is important because it promotes empathy from teachers and peers, which in turn, advocates for groups of students who may not receive support when dealing with traumatic incidents at home or in other aspects of their daily lives. A student must know they are not alone before ever sharing their personal experiences. In “Teaching Empathy and Promoting Global Citizenship,” Eir-Anne Edgar dives deeper into this, explaining how she has started choosing literature that helps her “proselytize the ‘good word’ of literacy” (67). Edgar assists students’ readings of various viewpoints portrayed in assigned texts. Facilitating these connections helps students feel comfortable and supported by their peers and teachers in order to perform well, stay engaged, and put forth effort in the classroom (Ayer 14). By selecting texts that not only represent the contemporary concerns of adolescent readers but that also speak up for and advocate for students dealing with trauma, teachers cultivate a safe space to facilitate discussions that promote healing and understanding.

### **Cultivating Discussions for Healing and Understanding**

YA literature’s characters can be vehicles for normalizing discussions about how to negotiate identity-based challenges. Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), for example, includes high school-aged characters and situations that portray how students deal with trauma, struggle with relationships, confront bullying, and face issues related to self-acceptance. In the novel, two high school seniors, Patrick and Sam, take freshman Charlie under their wings and show him the meaning of acceptance and friendship. However, Patrick and Sam need “to know that someone out there listens and understands” as much as Charlie (Chbosky 9). Through adventures and trials, they find themselves challenged by inner issues stemming from previously experienced traumatic events. It is during these explorations that

Chbosky represents a multitude of potentially familiar experiences, such as revealing sexual preference to family and friends, negotiating sexual preferences, and coping with sexual assault and depression. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* portrays how these different traumatic events are dealt with by vastly different groups of students to connect with readers.

The novel does not engage racial prejudice and discrimination nor does it examine intersectional identities between race and sexuality. However, it does focus on homophobia and the marginalization of students in the LGBTQ+ community, as portrayed through Patrick's character. Patrick's peers know he is gay, but his boyfriend, the quarterback of the football team, is closeted. They continue hiding their relationship throughout the novel because Patrick's boyfriend refuses to admit the truth due to the fear of his classmates' and father's homophobic opinions. In one scene, his boyfriend even goes as far as punching Patrick in the face to prove his masculinity. Patrick feels emotionally drained, and as Patrick and Charlie are hanging out one night, Patrick kisses Charlie out of sadness and desperation. As Charlie explains it, "We didn't do anything other than kiss. And we didn't even do that for very long. After a while, his eyes lost the glazy numb look... Then, he started crying. Then, he started talking about Brad" (Chbosky 91). It is possible that students belonging to the LGBTQ+ community may, like Patrick and his boyfriend, struggle against the prejudices they face living in a homophobic world, and in turn, might need a friend or some form of refuge to let them know they are not alone.

In "The Times They Keep A-Changin,'" Alex Sanchez examines the positive effect of reading YA literature that relates directly to personal struggle, such as "coming out" (20). Sanchez argues that students find their identities and self-value through reading texts that make them feel accepted and supported in the classroom, even though "the coming out experience is a universal story of self-discovery and being true to who you are," which, for some, may be more difficult and

sometimes traumatizing (22). Students who read about others grappling with the difficulty of finding and accepting identity, like Patrick in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, feel acknowledged when seeing their own experiences with marginalized or closeted sexual identities represented through YA characters. For students who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community or do not identify with similar traumas or discrimination, reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and other texts that engage LGBTQ+ issues can help them understand other's experiences, challenge heteronormativity, and encourage empathy with experiences outside of their own (Clark & Blackburn 28).

In another example, Sandra Cisneros's critically acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1984), portrays protagonist Esperanza's experiences, a twelve-year-old Chicana growing up in a small, run-down home on Mango Street in racially segregated Chicago. Esperanza's journey involves emotional and sexual self-discovery. Readers witness the challenges a young girl faces, while growing up in a poverty-stricken, troubled environment. Esperanza is filled with a deep desire to leave her neighborhood because it will never reach the aspirations she dreamt of her home having. Her fears are not without reason. After befriending Sally, a girl who is described to be so beautiful it is troublesome by her own sexually abusive father, Esperanza finds herself in the midst of a sexual crisis (Cisneros 81). After joining Sally in an adventure to the Money Garden, Esperanza is sexually assaulted and left only with the knowledge that her friend is a liar. She begs her friend Sally to not leave, and repeats to herself through her sobbing "I don't remember" (Cisneros 100).

Esperanza's assault constitutes a pivotal moment in the novel, a turning point that reveals how other female characters undergo similar traumatic incidents. She writes through the pain, and though she concludes by the end that she will one day return to save those like her on Mango Street, she decides she will first have to leave her home. Without leaving Mango Street, she will

never be able to return and make the changes necessary to save the kids from the trauma she endured while growing up there. Adolescent readers may relate to Esperanza for multiple reasons—a Latina student feeling isolated in a room full of peers who do not look like her, a student who has encountered sexual assault or harassment, or a student raised in a geographical region they are ashamed of. But even when students are less familiar with the cultural obstacles that Esperanza’s character faces, the novel’s incorporation of multiple points of view to tell its story invites readers to recognize the challenges within each community and to empathize with trauma survivors.

### **Advocating through Literary Representation**

In the recently published *Everyday Advocacy: Teachers who Change the Literacy Narrative* (2020), Cathy Fleischer and Antero Garcia describe everyday advocacy as “the vehicle that can transport ideas to reality” (7). One way to begin transporting these ideas and facilitating change for and within students is to question what possibilities we give to students regularly, who may be negotiating sexual trauma or identity-based marginalization. We need to empower the voices of struggling students by giving them a chance to reflect and learn from their hardships. And we might select class texts that represent students’ social struggles, promote healing, and demonstrate how to seek support for themselves, as well as how to advocate for peers facing similar obstacles. For instance, when selecting the books that her class will read during the upcoming school year, Carmen Lugo Llerena takes stock of the normalization of Eurocentric curriculum, recognizing that some teachers may be unsure of how to address the lack of inclusion of marginalized students. She asks herself, “Have I done enough to provide the counter narrative to decolonize a curriculum that privileges a select few and minoritizes most of my students?” (“Stories My Students Need to Hear”).

In order to “do enough,” we need to be intentional about selecting YA novels that

advocate for students to speak out about their traumatic experiences. One book that provides an approach for students to address their traumatic experiences is Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018). *Poet X* explores the high school experience of fifteen-year old Dominican American, Xiomara, who goes by “X” and works through her traumatic family experiences, sexuality, and her rejection of Catholicism. Xiomara struggles to be authentic in every aspect of her life because she feels like she has to conform to the stifling restrictions that her family, culture, men, and religion are imposing upon her. Her mother and father want her to be a well-mannered and chaste woman, but her community, especially the men in it, tell her that her worth relates to her body: “their gazes and words / are heavy with all of the things / they want you to be” (Acevedo 26). While negotiating these conflicting societal expectations, she discovers that she can find her voice and reclaim her power through poetry, reflecting, “I only know that learning to believe in the power of my own words has been the most freeing experience of my life. It has brought me the most light. And isn’t that what a poem is? A lantern glowing in the dark” (Acevedo 297).

Addressing and allowing students to talk about trauma using YA literature does not negate standards-driven education. Instead, it bolsters it. Incorporating *Poet X* into a junior or senior English class, for instance, teaches students to “determine two or more themes . . . and analyze their development over the course of a text, including how they interact and build on one another”; “to view literacy experiences as transactional, interdisciplinary, and transformational”; and “to think deeply and critically about text” (*Kentucky Academic Standards* 352). *Poet X* provides ELA students with a model for a teacher’s role in helping Xiomara address trauma through self-expression in slam poetry. Reading the novel critically engenders difficult questions about feeling and being marginalized in one’s home, school, and community. Most significantly, when Xiomara becomes inspired by the powerful effects writing through her pain has



had on her since joining the slam poetry club, the novel portrays how literacy can be a transformational experience that uncovers truth and shares it with others. Readers experiencing similar negotiations between conflicting social expectations and familial trauma observe that the English classroom can be a site for working through these conflicts and learning to advocate for one's self through words.

*Helping Children Deal with Stress during the 2019-nCoV Outbreak*, an infographic created by the World Health Organization, provides tips, such as “listen to their concerns and give them extra love and attention” and “speak kindly and reassure them” so parents and educators can help kids cope with the pandemic. These tips can be applied to educators, helping students manage traumatic events, such as depression, anxiety, and sexual assault. When recognizing the needs of our students and using detailed resources related to coping with struggling students, teachers naturally become advocates. Once advocacy becomes a mindset, as Fleischer and Garcia point out, a cycle of change can then begin (8). To combat retraumatizing students, teachers should preview reading topics, prior to assignments and discussions. This way, students are aware of the content in advance, as well as available resources if they deem a topic too uncomfortable or triggering. This can be accomplished through privileging student reading choice, or allowing students to choose from a variety of options. Using thoughtful questioning techniques, such as facilitating higher level thinking, to allow your room to be a safe space for students allows for the discussion of difficult topics.

Reading *Speak* helped one of the authors of this essay to feel as if she was “not alone,” to acknowledge the lingering trauma of sexual assault, and to access support and resources. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *Poet X* may be used canonically in other regions of Kentucky, although our pre-service classroom training did not include these texts. Beyond the featured YA books, there are texts that engage the social injustices addressed (and not addressed) in this essay, as well as texts that

focus on the intersectionality between characters' experiences. The list below includes additional reading recommendations.

### **Additional Reading Recommendations to Facilitate Conversations about Trauma and Marginalization in the High School English Classroom**

Channel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir* (2019)

In this memoir, Channel Miller recounts her own personal story of sexual assault and her legal fight for justice.

Malla Nunn, *When the Ground is Hard* (2019)

This is a story about a 16 year old girl, attending a Christian boarding school in Swaziland. When Adele Joubert is demoted from her popular friend group and assigned to room with an ostracized, rebellious student at a Keziah Christian Academy, Adele begins to question socioeconomic hierarchies.

Dadib Khorram, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* (2018)

Told from the perspective of a young Iranian-American, this YA novel addresses the struggles of navigating cultural heritage while finding your identity as a teenager.

Amy Lynn Reed, *The Nowhere Girls* (2017)

Told through alternative perspectives, this novel offers a criticism of rape culture and explores sexuality and real life as a teenage girl with brutal honesty.

Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* (2017)

This novel, told from the perspective of an African American teenager, addresses police brutality, racism, and the struggles of young Black people in America.

Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017)

Told from the perspective of a young Black woman, this novel tackles the tough but necessary topics of racism and police brutality and the power of speaking up.

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## **The Time Has Always Been Now: Realizations from a White Educator** *Daria Ochenkowski*

B.C.E. and A.D. are the terms used to describe the meaning before history was recorded and after history started to be recorded. In our lives, there are similar turning points categorized as “life before this event and life after this event.” A college trip to Selma, Alabama, was one of those experiences for me. Being a white female pre-service teacher, I understood that I would not look like a lot of the students I would teach, nor would I have the experiences of many of the students I would teach. Still, my trip became an unexpected catalyst for my journey with a never-ending destination of becoming an anti-racist educator. The two-day trip jump-started a lifetime of unlearning the white savior mentality, the unlearning of my bias, and the unlearning of color blindness. As most life experiences bring significant growth, it begins with great heartbreak; Selma proved to be just that.

Pulling into Selma, my heart sank. Not the “Oh poor you” feeling, but the feeling of an expectation not meeting a reality in an immense way. Selma was a place where history was made, where lives were changed, and chains were broken; on March 7, 1965, just months after the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed, John Lewis

and 600 others marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and faced attacks from law enforcement. Known as “Bloody Sunday,” this galvanized millions across the nation as they watched what happened on their TV screens. In the weeks that would follow, further action would be taken. Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As we drove to our first destination, the National Voting Rights Museum and National Museum for Peace and Justice, my face pressed against the window, I saw buildings upon buildings that had not been given attention for years. The paint was chipping on the sides of houses, the signs of stores were hardly readable, the streets covered in pot holes. A city that holds so much history looked so despondent. The desolation was a greater reflection of our nation’s apparent decision to turn its head away from the racism that has been present for over four hundred years than the events in Selma. Our country always has honored and changed in spurts, like a new year’s resolution, but it has never created a lifestyle. Selma displayed this. The city was disparaged, a spurt of growth came and left.

One of our stops included the National Voting Rights Museum, taking us through Black Americans' journey to get the right to the vote—the impetus of a democratic society. On the second day of the trip, we visited The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and Legacy Museum. It was here where we saw up close the atrocities of our nation, racism in the very soil of our roots seeing metal slab upon metal with names of men, women, and children that had been lynched in counties across the country. Each of the places left lasting impressions on my personal and professional life. Let the words of a poem I wrote be a snippet of the emotional impact that was only beginning:

When we become aware, we become  
accountable.  
That day in Montgomery and Selma, I  
became accountable.  
A heaviness rests on me.  
The guilt begins to settle. The responsibility  
became real.

Becoming an anti-racist educator is a process of continually evolving and engaging daily in the work. Everyone's process will be different. The four realizations that I had during my journey are: I will never arrive because the journey is continual, I have to acknowledge my privilege every day, writing is central, and I must take off my blindfolds and see the world through my students' eyes.

### **1. I will never arrive because the journey is continual:**

The trip to Selma was the catalyst to a journey that has no end. My journey of becoming an anti-racist educator is ongoing and requires that get my hands dirty. Cheryl Strayed states from her book, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Loveland Life from Dear Sugar*, "The obliterated place is equal parts destruction and creation. The obliterated place is pitch black and bright light. It is water and parched earth. It is mud, and it is manna. The real work of deep grief is making a home there." The juxtapositions of darkness and

light; mud and manna, destruction and creation; grief and hope are what I face as I continue to embark on becoming an anti-racist educator. The two days spent in Selma, Alabama, broke my heart open. For the first time, I experienced a deep sense of anguish for the irreparable harm that impressed my Black and Brown brothers and sisters. That is the grief. Looking into the eyes of my Black and Brown kids, knowing they have had to struggle to stand where they are and to see them persevere daily, that is the hope. I remember walking through the National Museum for Peace and Justice and my steps on the wooden pallets as I looked upon the metal slabs of the counties where lynchings had occurred and knew that this was not something I would relinquish. I chose to take this experience in Selma and make it a part of my journey as an individual and educator. In the spirit of Paulo Freire, my job is not merely to share information but to care for the souls of my students, to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of them. A part of my job is to ignite the interest of students and spark conversations that will transgress the norm, that will reach into the souls of my students and show them glimpses of hope, love, and joy that each carries. Talking about the decision that came down on the Breonna Taylor case and the day after the insurrection were by far the most sorrowful and hope-filled days of my teaching career. I started each of these conversations by acknowledging our class norms, and that class is a safe space. As a class, we looked at several sources to make sure our conversation stayed within factual guidelines. After presenting the facts, as a class, we talked about what our hearts felt, what we thought, and what actions to take moving forward. Though these conversations were not perfect, I saw the honesty of my kids, real and unstructured conversation. The optimism was palpable.

### **2. Acknowledging my privilege each day:**

As a white Christian female, I must recognize my privilege each day. I teach in a school where approximately 74% of our school population is a minority (Black or Hispanic) and where about

79% is eligible for free and reduced lunch. I cannot change my identities, but by acknowledging my identities and the privileges that come along with those identities, I enable and empower my students to know themselves and that by being themselves they can create change. I am not the sole giver of knowledge. I am not the only person that holds value. Peggy McIntosh, in her 1988 paper, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” stated, “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in the invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.” This is what I understood about racism. It falls way short of the racism that has been occurring over the last four hundred years. My privilege let me walk many years of my life without recognizing the monster. To be on the journey of becoming an anti-racist educator is to look at me first. Gholdy Muhammad states it best, “For educators to teach children, they must do their self-work and discover their identity (2020).” On this journey, I have had to forgo feeling ashamed of the identities I hold and instead own the identities I have and do good.

At the National Museum for Peace and Justice, I remember standing in front of a quote by Toni Morrison, “...And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it, and hold it up.” I stood in front of this quote for a while. My privilege has kept me from feeling the burden that the Black community has felt for centuries. Through Morrison’s words, is where I remember starting to see the glimpse that racism went deep into our nation’s history. Morrison is speaking about what she and so many Black and Brown people have lived for their entire lives. Her imagery is stark. I am thankful for her speaking her truth here; I tangibly felt this day that there is no going and changing the four hundred years of the past, but the next four hundred are up to us, helping lift the burden and raise the voices.

When I walk into my room each day (or log into my online platform), I have to look at myself and my experiences in the mirror. I realize that I already hold implicit biases (and I am ready to

listen with a humble heart) and that as a white Christian female I walk around with privilege. Because of that, my experiences are much different from that of my students. By acknowledging my privilege, I open the door to your students that says, “I’m here, I will listen, I am not the giver of knowledge.” By not acknowledging my privilege, I am saying to my students, “Your experience is not valid, work harder, and you wouldn’t be in this position.” I cannot change what I cannot see, so I will deeper into myself and acknowledge my placement in the world; then ask myself, *In what ways do I hold white privilege? What negative experiences has my white privilege protected you from? (i.e., being followed in a store).*

### 3. Writing is central:

In his book, *When Writers Drive the Workshop*, Brian Kissel quotes, “To teach children, you must know them. To know them, they must reveal. To reveal, they must feel safe and secure. To feel safe and secure, they need agency (2017).” Kissel gets right at the heart of the quote, “Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” I have found space leads to revealing; space comes from the writing. In my junior year of college, my professor introduced me to writing invitations. Each class began with ten minutes of us responding to a book, quote, picture, or just allowing the pen to take us where it did for the day. It was these writing invitations that drew me to love and crave writing. There was never a time where I couldn’t write; writing met me in the mundane, the heartache, and the joy.

Writing allowed me to process the trip to Selma; throughout the two days, we were asked to take time to reflect after each stop. Looking back at those entries, I found myself grappling with the grief and the hope. After leaving the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the first words I wrote were, “the brokenness of our country has never been so apparent.” This statement came out of my place of privilege, my starting point of unlearning and relearning. My new awakening is something that has been known

for centuries within the Black community. From here, my writing methods professor, Dr. Wheeler encouraged me to sit down and go through what Georgia Heard coined the “6 room strategy,” which had me focus on “image, light, sound, questions, feelings, and repeating words (1999)” of certain place and time on the trip. It was here that I entered into the space of analyzing my experience in my body, mind, and spirit. I would go through this process several times. Each time, digging deeper. There was grief, and there was hope. Without writing, I would not have had the proper space to unpack all that was sitting in front of me. Without writing, I would not have had the chance to look at my privilege or to see the glimpse of the light of what can be.

A piece of the journey of becoming an anti-racist educator means giving students space to write; students need choice and freedom. Writing creates safe and secure environment because there is no grade, only time, pen, and paper. When my Black and Brown students as well as my white students have space, the healing begins, the growing starts. I used picture books such as *Honey, I Love* by Eloise Greenfield, *Island Born* by Junot Diaz, or taking excerpts out of young adult novels such as *Piecing Me Together* by Renee Watson, read them aloud to my students (because we are never too old to be read aloud to) and then gave them the chance to write. Forth first several times, my students did not write lot and were unsure what to do because so much writing before has always been structured to a tee. Students can write through an invitation or respond to what they felt as they heard what was read. Incorporating opportunities for students to see themselves in text and then to have the free time and space to write about what they felt from the text allows students to begin to understand themselves in new ways, leading to them engaging with their world in new ways.

#### **4 . Taking off my blindfold to see the world through my students’ eyes:**

Something that struck me throughout the trip to Selma was the humanizing factor. When walking through the National Memorial for Peace

and Justice, there were names on the metal slabs; when walking through the National Voting Rights, it was filled with people’s names who played a role; and at the Ancient Africa Enslavement and Civil War Museum, our tour guide gave names to the enslaved he talked about. There are atrocities and horrors in our nation’s history. Seeing names of those lives taken too early and of those that persevered changed the way I viewed Black history. My mind shifted to thinking “this isn’t just enslavement; this just isn’t a law being passed; these points in history are people; it is about the people.” In no way does it take away the horror of the past four hundred years, but there was a humanizing that happened for me. This thinking transfers to my teaching; “This isn’t just school, this isn’t just social studies,” but rather, “These are scholars who each bring unique perspectives and stories to the table.” My job is to lift their perspectives and their voices. One step in the journey of evolving into an anti-racist educator has been the unlearning of color-blindness; seeing the black and brown skin tones of my students. This is a part of their identity, this is part of their beauty and for me not to recognize that is to not recognize part of their identity and that is dehumanizing.

Gholdy Muhammad states it clear in her book, *Cultivating Genius*, “Before getting to literacy skill development such as decoding, fluency, comprehension, writing or any other content learning standards, students must authentically see themselves in the learning (Muhammad, 2020).” The two parts that we must recognize here is the word “authentically” and “in the learning.” Muhammad’s use of “authentically” is vital because kids will spot my bluff. My Black and Brown students know that they have not seen themselves in their learning for possibly their entire learning career, but they will also instantly pick up when I have thrown in a piece of diversity into the lesson plan. Her statement of “in the learning” signifies the process of identity work; it does not happen in one lesson, one writing invitation. It is a daily grind of making sure my sources display my students that

each student has an equal opportunity to write about their experiences, that each student has space to become a more informed and active citizen. It is celebrating who they are and where they are. Muhammad also quotes, “If [students] do not know themselves, others will tell them who they are, in ways that may not be positive or accurate (Muhammad, 2020).” My students must learn to grasp who they are so as they walk out of school into the world, they can dispel the negative stereotypes the world seemingly places on them.

bell hooks, a social activist, American author, and professor has created ripples in the education world for her work around anti-racist teaching. In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), quotes,

There are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountain top, and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach with our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.

hooks’s quote encompasses the spot that I continually find myself in; it is a space of reckoning and wrestling. I want to keep yearning, reckoning, and longing. The process of metamorphosing into an anti-racist educator has only just begun, but I hope as you have read this article you have had the chance to reflect on your

own practices and feel empowered to take a step in the direction of chipping away to find the beauty of our students.

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