TEACHING RACIALLY CHARGED LITERATURE: CAN "N*GGER" BE THE *MOT JUSTE?*

by Daniela Buccilli

> "We've never, ever committed ourselves to a process of truth and reconciliation of our history. We didn't talk about the consequences of a myth that created slavery, and because of that, slavery didn't end; it evolved. We didn't think about what it meant to terrorize people between the end of Reconstruction and WWII; and then we had Jim Crow and segregation. And we dominated and humiliated people for decades without appreciating the harm done by that. And now we are in an era where our failure to talk honestly about race and the legacy of racial inequality haunt us. […] We are so trapped by our silence that it is hard for us [American history with racial injustice], but we've got to change that. You know, in Germany there was the Holocaust, a horrific, horrific history; but if you go there you are required to confront that legacy. There are monuments and memorials, and there are totems that make you have to deal with it, but in this country we try to hide that history, and it manifests itself in tragic ways" (Stevenson, Bryan. Interview on *The Daily Show* October 16, 2014).

I teach August Wilson's award winning play *Fences* (1986) to lower-tracked 11th graders in a predominately-white and conservative school district. My colleague and I use Gloria Naylor's article from *The New York Times* "The Meanings of a Word"(1986) to help us with the very beginning of the play, a beginning where Wilson has the hero Troy use the word "nigger"[1].

I start the lesson (that usually spans two to three days[2]) with the announcement that I refuse to use the "n-word." I am honest about how the word makes me cringe to hear and to say—that growing up in the 70's and 80's as a white person has made the word nothing but a hate word for me; and I choose not to use hate language. *I may be old-fashioned, and you might think I'm wrong, or that I am being fussy or fearful; maybe you think I'm exaggerating, but I have made my decision based on information and experience that you will also have. You will have to make your decision. Don't make a decision without being informed, though. Ignorant people do so. You may think you know everything about the n-word; let's see.* This lesson challenges students to decide what the word means to them after reading "The Meaning of the Word," published the same year as the play.

I am completely aware that my students already know the word, may have used the word, love music that uses the word, and now must read a play where the word appears many times in Act 1. The "ground rules" for class is that as the leader of the room, I will not permit the word to be used in my classroom because derogatory or hate words (as well as curse words) change the atmosphere of a classroom from an educational place to a toxic place. On the other hand, the word is absolutely appropriate when we quote the play, read aloud the play, or talk about the word as a word, itself. I tell them that we honor Wilson's craft choice by asking why the word "nigger" is the "mot juste" for the context in which it appears. *Wilson made intentional decisions, and so will you.*

The lesson continues with a "Private Writing" for about 10 minutes: "What kinds of words are used against you in school? By whom? How does the use of these words affect you? How many of the words seem to you to be hate words? How can you tell a word is a weapon of hate?" I often tell a story of a girl in my elementary school who was called "Horse," which hurt her every time she heard it. Even though there were plenty of little girls who loved horses, nobody wanted to be called "Horse." We were 7, but we could recognize a hate word. I ask, "What makes a word a weapon? Why and how does a word hurt?" This discussion is open-ended, of course. I learn more than I give, at this point. I allow myself to react emotionally to what I hear. Every story deserves time.

The students are directed to read Naylor's article and comment in the margins. I ask them to mark those places in the essay where they agree, where they disagree, and where they don't understand. I ask them to respond with questions for Naylor and with narratives of their own. The students begin the reading in class and usually finish at home. The "After Reading" questions are questions I want them to prepare answers for; these questions will guide their "literature circle" discussion. The next day when I walk around the classroom "eavesdropping," I write down bits of their conversation to share at the end of the period. Along with sharing "the best of the day's conversation, according to the teacher" fifteen minutes before the end of the period, I ask each group to share what *they* think is the best part of their conversation. I ask for a leader to speak for the group.

Many times this is the moment that some students challenge me and say that they have the right to use the word, and that they don't appreciate my restricting them from saying it. At which time I rhetorically ask the class if anyone ever wanted to use the word in any of the ways Naylor delineates. I ask the students to help me make a list on the board of the various meanings that Naylor explains in the essay: "nigger"[3] to mean an admired man of strength, intelligence, or drive; in the possessive, a term of endearment for a husband or boyfriend; to mean manhood, itself, especially a man who has survived victoriously despite injustice. Or, do you mean a group of people who lack self-respect. Or, are you like the little boy in Naylor's third-grade class, a person who uses the word to demean and humiliate? I remind them that even children can tell a person's intention with words.

Now, why do you want to use the word so badly? If you use it, which definition do you mean? Don't be fake. Know who you are and be who you want to be. Be proud of your decision. Be an educated person; not a person who uses words without knowing their historical or cultural significance. Now, your homework is private. Ask yourself and decide what the word means to you. This is not a written assignment, but a real-life assignment. Your decision may need more time. Take it.

And when you feel the constraints that society has put on you when it comes to the n-word, recognize those constraints, and remember that some people in the country and in the world feel society's constraints all the time and in lots of ways. Knowing this feeling personally is what it means to understand yourself, history, and other people. This is what it means to be educated, and not ignorant[4].

When I was taught to teach, closure was emphasized as a powerful tool that sometimes, unfortunately, I forget to make time for. But asking students to make a private decision about what the word means to them is the key to this lesson in my mind. It is our job as the teacher to create space and time for important questions. I don't know what my students will need to know in the future, but I put my trust in excellence literature like August Wilson's plays to help guide us to the questions we must ask.

NOTES

[1]This little, seemingly inconsequential bit of conversation is the perfect beginning to "teach the audience" what to expect in this play. Troy and Bono are discussing the fool-hearted, self-conscious unnamed man who hides a watermelon as he walks by his white employer.

The students are asked to quietly read the conversation (only a few lines of dialogue), after which I ask, "Why is this unnamed man hiding the watermelon?" Many kids assume he is hiding a watermelon because he stole it. The question is where in the play is there evidence that the watermelon was stolen? Nowhere. So why is this man hiding it, and how do Troy and Bono feel about him? Troy calls him a "nigger." Which definition of the word does Troy use here? Consider Naylor's essay.

It doesn't take long for students to see that they jumped to the wrong conclusion. The question to ask now is why did they jump to that conclusion? Some students respond defensively and want to announce that they are not racist for making that assumption. But we must ask ourselves what are the underlying assumptions that lead some of us to think a crime was committed? *You might find that the play challenges assumptions. Wilson is a genius*, I tell them. *He does everything for a reason. He will make you start to see the world like Troy. Drama can be transformative.* I tell them: *prepare to be changed.* This lesson can be done on the day the book is passed out, or after the Naylor essay. Students don't have to read more than a page to get it. It is a great hook.

[2]As we proceed through these two or three days with Naylor's essay, the students will read Act 1 at home. They will have been given a calendar with two deadlines: Act 1 deadline and Act 2 deadline. They are to decide when and how much their daily reading will be in order to prepare for the literature discussion for that act. For my Learning Support students, I give them a reading guide. The reading guide is also available to the other students, but it is not a graded assessment.

[3]On the board, I write "N-word" in case our classwork is taken out of context in a photo or by a passer-by. I'm just being real, here.

[4]I have written the word "ignorant" on the board with the definition "not knowing." Sometimes I have to address the colloquial definition of "rude." I tell them that "rudeness" is not what I mean when I say "ignorant."