Teacher Round Table—A Conversation Inspired by Arianna Banack's "Connecting and Critiquing the Canon: Pairing *Pride* and *Pride and Prejudice*"

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Study and Scrutiny *has focused on the publication of critical and empirical studies surrounding the scholarship and critical merits of Young Adult literature. Because other journals provide a space for pedagogical practices concerning YA, the editors have intentionally shied away from explaining to teachers how to teach a particular title in a particular way. Still, the intention of the journal has been, in part, to support the learning of secondary students as readers and the classroom practices of their teachers. This section hopes to serve as a space to open the conversation surrounding YA literature, its critical merits, and ways that the research might serve teachers as they make curriculum choices about both texts and strategies. The idea is to bring teachers, as intellectuals, into conversation surrounding the scholarship of a featured study. For this issue, four Oklahoma teachers from four different school districts focus on Arianna Banack's article "Connecting and Critiquing the Canon: Pairing Pride and Pride and Prejudice."*

THE TEACHERS

SHAISTA FENWICK has been teaching for six years. Originally from Trinidad Tobago, Shai moved to Houston, Texas where she began a teaching career working as a paraprofessional focused on adaptive behavior for the hearing and visually impaired. She's taught in the middle grades at an Oklahoma City charter school, and this is her third year teaching British literature to seniors at Moore High School. Keeping YA novels on the bookshelves of her classroom library, Shai often excerpts YA lit to draw parallels and "inform and season what's happening in the curriculum."

NAJAH AMATULLAH HYLTON, an author and spoken word artist in her ninth year as an English teacher, is currently teaching sophomores at Putnam City West High School. She's taught in several schools around the Oklahoma City metro area, three years with 7th-graders, as well as two years with juniors and seniors. Najah loves reading YA lit, keeps it in her classroom library for leisure reading, and has taught a few YA novels whole class, like *Wonder* to 7th-graders and currently *The Book Thief* to her 10th-graders. However, Najah has intentionally leaned into teaching the canon because she wants her students to know they are "fully capable of tackling classical texts."

SUZANNE SUTTON, after fifteen years as an English Language Arts teacher, is in her first year as a library/media specialist at Classen School of Advanced Studies in Oklahoma City. She began teaching English in a rural setting with juniors and seniors, along with AP classes, where much of her curriculum focused on the canon. The latter half of that career found Suzanne in an urban setting, teaching 8th and 9th graders, where she incorporated YA literature with book club scenarios, for example a Coming-of-Age theme with titles like *Monster*, *House on Mango Street*, as well as including graphic novels like *American Born Chinese* and *Pashmina*.

CONNOR WOODARD is in his fifth year of teaching secondary English, having taken a year off in the middle to work on his masters' degree. Currently he teaches on-level and honors-level sophomores, as well as AP juniors, at Norman North High School. His work with YA literature has included titles like *House on Mango Street*, *Persepolis*, and *Dreamland Burning*. He's also ventured into literature circles, where his sophomores chose their own titles, largely YA novels. Connor enjoys the support of an administration that once he's supported his curriculum choices with a rationale, along with the standards, he can teach, even with the video game, *Undertale,* which Connor likens to YA lit in its engagement and appeal to students.

THE QUESTIONS

GUIDING THE READING

Teachers were asked to read "Connecting and Critiquing the Canon," with the following questions in mind:

1. What key concepts do you find compelling?
2. In what ways might those concepts be taught in a secondary classroom?
3. What concepts seem unrealistic or uncomfortable when you think about adapting them for your curriculum and your students?
4. What concepts might work well with your curriculum and particularly with your students?

GUIDING THE CONVERSATION

While I had prepped several questions, I explained that I hoped for a conversation led organically by the teachers, themselves. We began with the question, *What were your first impressions of the Banack article?* From there, the conversation took off, naturally meandering around the four questions they had been asked to keep in mind. Two questions emerged, that I had not initially planned. In full disclosure, they likely emerged because of a recent conversation I'd had with Kylene Beers in a 2021 NCTE round table session via Zoom. I cannot remember what I asked, but her answer included essential questions she asks to help students engage with a text:

- What surprised you about the article?
- What in this article or in this conversation has changed, challenged, or confirmed your thinking?

THE CONVERSATION

For the sake of clarity, the conversation has been edited, taking out many of the repeated words and thinking-out-loud discourse that, while interesting in the moment, seems to not add to a discourse in print. Several themes emerged in the conversation, including the current context of anti-CRT legislation, why the canon remains important, concepts of erasure, teaching strategies, and more. As discussion has a way of meandering with recursiveness, these themes crop up in more than one place. However, the conversation has been organized into the following three sections:

- First Impressions and Grappling with CRT
- Moving into Pedagogy and Teaching the Canon
- Final Thoughts

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND GRAPPLING WITH CRT

Asking about first impressions made it clear that the timeliness of "Connecting and Critiquing the Canon" with the critical framework of Critical Race Theory caught everyone's attention. Suzanne had commented earlier that the premise of Banack's article would work well in an AP curriculum, but the consensus of actually teaching with the CRT framework would need careful consideration. Like much of the country and as Suzanne will explain, we are teaching in a "tinder box." While neither the acronym CRT nor the phrase Critical Race Theory are specifically mentioned in Oklahoma House Bill 1775, eight specific concepts are now strictly forbidden. Two of those eight concepts forbidden to "make part of a course" include:

> *g.* any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex, or
>
> h. meritocracy or traits such as hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race to oppress members of another race.

SUZANNE: So, we're going to address the big red flag of CRT [smiling and laughing] just write that right off the bat?

SHELLY: Yeah. I think that might be an appropriate way to start.

SUZANNE: I love that you can take any critical theory and make it a literary critical theory. And I love the exploration that [teachers and students] can do. I just feel that right now this time period is a bit of a tinderbox because, you know, in Oklahoma, it's literally against the law to teach CRT anywhere. So, I really loved the ideas that [Banack] brought up in this article. I thought she did a really good job of explaining the tenants that she was pulling out, that were directly taken from Critical Race Theory. And I think if a teacher wanted to adopt this, they'd just have to be really conscientious and maybe sneaky about how they present this to their class, because we are living in that… in that time.

NAJAH: Shaista and I were at the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English Conference, a few weeks back. They had a huge panel about CRT in the classroom. And it's funny that you brought that up because I saw it… and there was a part of me that was glad it was there. And then there

was a part of me that felt like it was unnecessary because… *to what end*? Yes, she pulled directly from [CRT], but what most of us know… and what they talked about at the conference is that the concepts of Critical Race Theory are not actually what we're teaching. We're teaching these *themes*. And so all these things that she lays out, even though those themes are co-relative to Critical Race Theory, you do just as well to *not* say that out loud as you do to say it aloud.

SHAI: My first thought was, *Okay, so, we're going there* [as she cocks her head to one side]. *All right.* And then my second thought was *Is that the only place we're going*? Because I have questions, now. So, a little bit about my background [her right hand moves just a little above her head, pointing to her nonwhite features]. I'm not from the United States, I'm from Trinidad Tobago. I moved to Houston and then to Oklahoma. When I arrived in Houston, Houston was the whitest place I had ever lived. And it was astonishing… on a daily basis, how the world worked here, to me. And then… Oklahoma.

So moving forward…what hit me was that everything in here [Banack's article]… I get the naming of the CRT pieces, but also, because when you tie in Freire, that conversation of needing to name it, I get that. But I feel that the Freire piece should've been cited in here—when you talk about the power of naming to ground it in that necessity. The other piece I would say is that you need to also bring in a little Peggy McIntosh, because I think that's almost more relevant. So, the CRT pieces, yes, absolutely—the economic tie in is 100% a legal piece you need to kind of quantify in that way. But Peggy McIntosh is more relevant for classroom practice.

The other thing I would say is that we live in a multinational space, especially for teaching in Oklahoma, in the central Oklahoma area. We have Afghan refugees coming in. We have multiple languages in this space. We have multinational people in this space. And that is *especially* when you talk about *Pride and Prejudice*, which is usually taught in Brit Lit, and when we talk about the history of British imperialism. So many of these cultures are now becoming American cultures because they're coming to the United States. I feel like there's a piece in there too, that we need to trouble the water in that way as well.

SUZANNE: Yeah, there is a post-colonialism aspect to it and that might be an interesting avenue.

SHAI: Yeah. The other thing that hit me with *Pride and Prejudice*, which I'm teaching right now, so I'm like soaking in this conversation. So, Charlotte Mecklenburg was queen during the time that this novel was written. So, when you talk about multiethnic representation, you also need to lean more into multiethnic erasure. And that is a conversation I don't think we have enough in the context of *Pride and Prejudice*. This is the age of *Bridgerton*. Right? I mean, it's not like that conversation isn't being had in public American spaces. So, why isn't it included more in our canon when we teach it?

SUZANNE: Yeah, that part of the article really stuck out to me. Banack did mention that Jane Austen just kind of erases everybody who's not white. And also, there's no talk of any lower classes, class structure, or things like that—which is a whole different kettle of fish. But these are things that need to be brought in because… I grew up in a rural white area and we didn't talk about race at all. Unless sometimes in a negative context, you know? Well, a lot of times in a negative context. So, I'm coming at this article from two different points of view: one from my teaching in an urban setting and one from a rural setting. These are ideas that need to make it out to small towns. They need to see that there's gentrification in small towns… and when they talk about land. These are issues that are more prevalent than not, and they need to be addressed to all of our students in all walks of life. Not just ones who are like, "Oh yes, I can identify myself with this novel. Maybe this other novel, I do not identify myself. Why don't I identify myself? Those are important perspectives.

NAJAH: For sure. I love this novel, [*Pride*]. I was going to do this pairing. And then, um… pandemic made it to where I had to teach all online. When I say all online, I don't mean the virtual teaching that everybody was doing. I wasn't making my own curriculum and I was doing a different kind of online program. It was traumatic for me. But I was so excited when I read the novel, because Zoboi did just a phenomenal job of layering in what Susanne was just talking about. And what Shai talked about too, with multi-ethnicity. Also, I wanted to say I've studied *Pride and Prejudice* twice, two or three times in school—in university. And I did not know that the Darcy family was supposed to be rich because of slavery. I was like, *Oh, really?*! Like I read this article that I was like… that missed me!

And then the idea that you've got the Benitez family. Benitez is a Latin name, a Latin name-marker, but they're black. My family's Panamanian too and being at Putnam City West, having a large, um… a large Latine population, we've talked a lot about like the different cultures and the different Caribbean ethnicities and different Latine populations. And so, I loved that in Pride. And I think kids, seeing that they're not just American Black, they're Black and Latine. And they're in New York. And they have all of these layers of things, that are relevant to cultures that our kids will probably bump up against. The same cultures that they see probably in the TV shows they watch and things of that nature. I mean, if they watch Ghost [in a show called *Power],* if they watch *Insecure*, the ideas of gentrification, and the ideas of who lives on which side of town, all that stuff is going to come up. So having the opportunity to read that in *Pride*, I thought was really, really cool. I thought she did a fantastic job with that.

SUZANNE: I agree with that assessment, and I can see my students, in particular, at Classen, identifying with this. Just a brief history: a few years ago, Oklahoma City went through redistricting and our school was split. The middle grades stayed in the original building and the high school is now at the old Northeast Academy. It was it was a lot. But students who were who were there, saw gentrification coming in. Because all of a sudden, the neighborhood got a little cleaner. They got sidewalks, they got bus stops that were perfect, that kind of a thing. So there were a lot of questions that came up with the students who were already at Northeast. Now that all these white kids are coming in, the city and school district feel the need and are putting money into this area. There are direct ties, that even students who are still there would probably pick up on.

CONNOR: To come back to initial impressions. I'd never heard of the book, *Pride*, before. I'm not a big Jane Austin fan. I'm certainly not the target audience of a Jane Austen novel. I've only ever read it for a few classes during my undergrad, and I hated [laughing] every time I read it because it's not for me. I would infinitely rather teach *Pride* than *Pride and Prejudice* and I feel sorry for the people who have to teach it. I'm sure there's value in it. I'm not saying there isn't, but I definitely would rather teach *Pride* because it seemed infinitely more interesting.

But then I was like, *Okay, this is cool. So, what suggestions are you going to have for how to use it in the classroom?* But in the article, you get to the very end and there's just little paragraph or two, like, *Yeah, this might be kind of tough but good luck*. I was like hoping for more in the actual article like

recommendations on how to do it, besides just yes pair it and maybe you'll get away with it better. I don't know if anyone else ran into the same frustration.

SHELLY: So, so let me address that. Initially, Banack did provide suggestions for use in the classroom, but *Study and Scrutiny* is focused on research and scholarship, with the belief that there are other journals providing the how-to stuff for teachers. So, part of our teacher conversation is to explore the possibility of how you might use it in the classroom, where teachers as intellectuals are figuring this out. Sorry to create that gap, but that was purposeful and in line with the journal's focus. This conversation is an opportunity for us to open up that space for teachers, for pedagogy.

CONNOR: I think going into it—even though you said differently in your initial email—I just figured like, *Oh teachers, we're going to get a pedagogical article* and it was more like an English Lit article. So, by the end of it I'm like, *Oh, we're going to do that part*.

NAJAH: Can I just ask, what questions did you have? About the implementation?

CONNOR: In terms of the end with, *Hey, we know discussing CRT is tricky, but here you go*. I mean, it's like you said earlier, the actual language of the law isn't as restrictive as it initially sounds because it's clearly just meant to scare people away from talking about race in the classroom. And you can actually still do talk about race, plenty. As long as you're smart about it and not making your students blatantly feel bad.

But I came away with wondering how people would do the implementation of paired text, because I just haven't done that as much. I was hoping the article would get into that more. From my perspective, when I think "paired text," I think of… from the lazy-student perspective of like, *Great, now I have to read two things, instead of one thing.*

[laughter from the group]

SUZANNE: I have that in my notes too, like *two novels*? I can already hear the kids, *like we have to read two novels? It's about the same thing! Can't we just watch the movie?* Considering Shelly's question about

what would be unrealistic in thinking about adapting… it's reading two novels. Neither one of them are super long, but still, you give a kid two books and they're like, *Oh my gosh, my life is over.*

MOVING INTO PEDAGOGY AND TEACHING THE CANON

As the conversation moved toward implementation of pairing texts, the teachers address important concepts of critical literacy and, without naming it, CRT, while working with students, not only to interrogate the texts they read and discuss, but to center themselves within those texts, whether YA lit, the canon, or otherwise. These teachers intentionally do not shy away from the complexity and rigors of the canon, realizing that doing so would be at the peril of their students. Yet they also affirmed the idea of complexity and rigor also existing in YA lit and other accessible texts, including multi-modal texts.

SHAI: We've actually paced our curriculum a little differently this year. We do a critical lenses piece at the beginning of the year where I give them three short stories—it's basically onboarding for how we're going to do work in the room. It allows us to get some tough conversations out of the way early, which is great. The three texts I use are James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew," "The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas" by Ursula Le Guin, and Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal." So, we're moving through time. We are moving through identity. And we're using a critical lenses.

So, we start this conversation early. We talk about not just who is on the page and explicitly mentioned, but who is not on the page and must be in the space, and therefore is being purposefully erased or left out. Because those are also perspectives. I mean, *presence* is one aspect of representation, but so is *purposeful absence*. We have that conversation from the jump and that really helps set the stage to interrogate these texts from multiple perspectives going forward. So, when we talk about *Pride and Prejudice*, typically I include pre-reading involving the historical time period, teaching students how to do research, and all that other good stuff you get in Brit Lit, that they need to walk out of school knowing. And then, we also talk about a really great movie called *Bride and Prejudice.*

SUZANNE: [nodding her head and smiling] Bollywood!

SHAI: Yeah, it brings in Bollywood. I'm actually Indian. So, I bring in my sari. We talk about Indian wedding traditions. We talk about imperialism and colonialism and post-colonialism and all those pieces, right? And we talk about this as a multinational, multiethnic text. So, the idea of pairing Zoboi's *Pride* would be phenomenal for me. Because… we read and talk about it, frequently, as a romantic novel. But when you look at it as an economic survival text, this is *warfare in lace*. So, the perspective of what non-gender conformity looks like and the price for that… When you start looking at it as an economic warfare text, you get to interrogate a whole lot more and it gets to be for more people.

So, with my kids in the classroom on a workday, we're having conversations about mental health for men and how that is *un*represented in our society and what gender roles for men do to male mental health. When you look at it from that perspective, this novel is very powerful for multiple people, whom it may not necessarily seem to be for. And I really like that. So, when we talk about what Najah mentioned, that this is a hard text. It is. It's displaced in time. It's displaced in culture. It also talks about wealth and class and that those are different things, especially in British society. British society does talk about that. American society conflates the two. This, I think allows for some of that separation and interrogation. And I that's one of the reasons I really like the original text, because it's in there. But you have to teach them the language for it and what the coding is?

I think that Zoboi does a pretty good job with that. But there is an American perspective that does conflate the two. That is a great comparative thing, if you're talking about teaching them as paired texts. So, they talked about that *Bride and Prejudice*, because that happens in India a lot too. That's real— like Indian money and Indian class are very, very different things. And I think if you're talking about, not just paired texts, but paired tests across multiple modality, that this is a really great way to do that.

SUZANNE: And that's the standard!

NAJAH: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Across different texts is the standard. So, just a couple of notes from everything that I just heard Shai say. A couple of things that I was planning to do. I was going to read *Pride*, cover to cover. I was going to excerpt *Pride and Prejudice*. I was not going to read *Pride and Prejudice* cover to cover. I was going to pull out specific things that were the same and specific

things that were different, with an emphasis on *Pride*. I was probably going to watch the movie *Pride and Prejudice, also*.

I like the idea of doing the Bollywood version, applying the cultural lens—that's one of the standards too. I love the idea of showing the Bollywood movie instead of the Keira Knightley version for that reason, and how those concepts are similar and how they're different in India, in Britain, than in the US. So, the movie, the excerpting, and the focal point of one text over the other. You could also make a different choice of focusing on one text over the other. Like, I'm not even necessarily here to say that if you were to excerpt *Pride* and read *Pride and Prejudice* cover to cover that, that would be the wrong decision. I don't necessarily think that's true. It just depends on which aspect of it that you are focusing on.

Because I think that these ideas that Britain handed down to the US--what have they done to culture in the US? I think that's a big thing, like what you were saying about about mental health. I think that's a huge thing that kids could be interested in and could learn from, and could be a research point because research is a big deal with the seniors, as well. So yeah, movies, excerpting, focusing on a text, or**…** I don't know how much freedom everybody has, but for me, I would have played with, if I were teaching seniors this year, I would have played with doing fewer short stories. It sounds like what Shai did—doing fewer short stories and fewer other texts. And having the bulk of our work be those two novels. Unless you just have a whole bunch of other things that you feel like you need to be giving your students. That was one of my plans, for the bulk of our work to be those two things.

SHAI: I had a day, when they were just little tired of everything. So, I pulled out *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* out of my back pocket. And that was a fun day. They had to reinterpret their theme and then rewrite the first line and kind of represent it that way too. And so, I mean, there's a lot of fun that can be had with this, right? The great thing about *Pride and Prejudice* is that… I mean, there's 17 different English adaptations alone, much less multiple different nationalities and more modern texts, all sorts of things. So you can play with this novel in almost every way imaginable. Teaching kids that the canon is unassailable and un-queer-able is, I think, exactly the opposite of what a canon is. Especially in modernity, right? Like we have the right—like cats can look at kings—we have the right to interrogate, reinterpret, and re-present text from our points of view, especially in America. This is a very US point of view that you have, not only the right to do

that, but the responsibility to do that in terms of creating representation, where you feel it doesn't effectively exist. And that gives kids power. That's never a bad thing.

SUZANNE: Yeah, I like that a lot. There's another book. If you want to bring a more of the class structure breakdown—it's *Longbourn,* by Jo Baker. So, it's basically *Pride and Prejudice*, but from the housemaid's point of view. Longbourn's the name of the Bennett's house. It goes into more detail than… the way that Jane Austen presented the Bennett sisters, it's like, *Oh, they're just kinda like doing the best they can, but they don't have any money and poor, pitiful them*. Well, they're not the housemaid who's doing all the washing. I mean Lizzie Bennet just walks through the mud to get somewhere—who's going to clean that up, you know? It's not Lizzie Bennet. It brings in a different perspective. At the end of the novel, after Mr. Darcy and Lizzie get married—Lizzy wants to bring this housemaid with her. And she's like, *I don't want to serve you for the rest of my life*. So, it brings in a much-needed perspective, a much-needed retelling within British structure, as well, because those voices were there. There's one named lower-class person in the entire novel [*Pride and Prejudice*] and now this whole book [*Longbourn*] is about her. You could bring in excerpts of that, interspersed with your focus text.

NAJAH: I love that! What does it look like to read *Longbourn* and *Pride*? That's whoa! Yeah, Next level right there.

SHAI: Brilliant. Also, I'm not going to lie. I'm going to go and get this book because that sounds amazing. [laughing]

NAJAH: Yeah, the audible book's out there and I want to hear it, for sure.

SHELLY: As I'm listening, it's sounds like three of you are very immersed in *Pride and Prejudice* and all things alternate *Pride and Prejudice*. I'm not quite, where Connor is—I loved reading *Pride and Prejudice* as a young adult. So, I have all these fond memories, but I am much less aware of all of these other alterations. You are really informing me. So, Connor I'm trying to open a pathway for to you to enter the conversation. What surprised you about the article or about Bannock's approach to *Pride* and *Pride and Prejudice*?

CONNOR: I don't know if anything surprised me. It was… Here are issues with the canon. Here's a text that does a good job of a re-interpreting and addressing some of those issues. And here you go. I don't think I was necessarily surprised with anything. I was pleased to learn of the existence of the book *Pride*.

I do think, with the canon in general, she seemed very dismissive of it. Just to be clear, I don't like the canon in terms of my personal—would I ever read for fun? Almost none of them would I ever read for fun. But I think the impression I got from the article was if it was up to her, just like none of the canon would be… almost never teach it. I don't think she says that directly, but it was very like, *We don't like it* was the impression I got. And I think when teaching it, you absolutely need to acknowledge the erasure and the lack of representation in the canon and not just teach the canon. I think that's the big thing—not that teaching the canon is bad. It's teaching *just* the canon that's bad. And when you're teaching the Canon, knowing what you're doing it for. Because, you know, my class of on-level sophomores have dramatically different needs than my AP juniors**.** My AP juniors need to be really going out of the way to read difficult texts. Not just to increase their reading abilities, but to prepare for the AP test. And then kids in my on-level sophomore class haven't read a book in *ever*. So, I'm trying to get them just to read something they're interested in. And I do think that it's really important to acknowledge those differences. And I do like what you said about just using excerpts. Excerpts of the canon for maybe an on-level class. I do think that's a good idea especially to kind of address the *Oh, no, we have to read two things*. It's like we're going to read one and a quarter of things, instead.

NAJAH: Yeah, So, to that point, I think that's what I found myself running into. The three years that I spent at Millwood, I had sophomores for two of those years. In my last year, I juniors and seniors. And definitely, the first thing was like, we don't we haven't read anything. Or if we read the thing, it's like all short stories. And then for a while around Oklahoma City public schools, there was a push not to read novels because they take up too much time, so let's only read short stories because you can hit those skills faster. It's better for the tests, you know.

SUZANNE: Exactly, we gotta pass those tests, girl! [laughing]

NAJAH: Right. Exactly. So I found myself at Millwood—Millwood is a very specific school in that there's some years with no white kids in the whole high school and some years there's like two. There's never a lot. It's just a very different environment than you might get hardly anywhere else, with it still being a public school. So, for a lot of the reasons Conner just said, my thing going in was like, I'm not going to baby you. If you ask my old students who I'm friends with on Facebook now, like Miss Hylton was not going to baby you. And so that is why we read *Julius Caesar*. You can be mad about it all you want to, but also if you just pay attention, you'll get it, because you're not a baby and you're smart enough to get it.

We watched like the old Charlton Heston movie version, while we read along with it. So, I've always been torn between wanting my students to have access to all the things… and wanting them to be interested. So those same kids that I forced to read *Julius Caesar* as sophomores, when they were juniors and seniors, read *Malcolm X* and *Othello.* I didn't hand them YA novels, not because they weren't of high interests to me, but because I felt like my role there was to help them see that they could do the hard thing. *Malcolm X* is not hard to read, but it is long. You're going to have to have stamina to do it. And then Shakespeare is always going to be Shakespeare. But remember you guys did this in tenth grade and we're going to do it again with Othello. And this one's even juicier than *Julius Caesar* is, so instead of killing each other for ambition, they kill each other because somebody stole somebody's girl, but not really.

SUZANNE: And also, racism.

NAJAH: And racism.

SUZANNE: Um hum… and jealousy.

NAJAH: Yeah. And that's, and that's why basically why we did *Othello* instead of Hamlet or Othello instead of… *Macbeth*. So, I'm with you on the need to have rigorous texts. And that's something that I find myself coming up against a lot. This year, [at Putnam City West H.S.] we're doing the *Book Thief*. I think it's actually supposed to be on a middle school level, although some of the diction is a little bit higher. But it is also 500 pages and that's what they keep looking at. We're in the middle of it now, and they're like *Miss. Hylton, It's just so long!* And I'm like, *Okay, calm down… You're*

fine. We're doing it in class, it's fine. But I'm doing that now. And we're going to do *Julius Caesar* at the end of the year. Because I have only on-level—I don't have any honors or AP—I think that it's important for them to know that they can.

But I'm kind of torn. I wish I had more stories that I could pair for my sophomores and for my younger kids. I feel like everything is for seniors… There's a lot of stuff for Brit Lit that's been re-imagined for a younger audience. I don't feel like there are as many things for the younger grades, for American Lit, or for World Lit. That's something that I've run into.

SUZANNE: My advice is to talk to your school librarian [laughing], because she might have some resources for you that you just might not come across on your own—if you even have time to look it up. Talk to your school librarian about adaptations for other texts you're looking at.

You also mentioned rigor, and as English teachers, I think we, especially, have a tendency to conflate rigor for long and old and… complexity—when complexity and rigor can look like very different things. Like *Maus*, the graphic novel is a very complex, very rigorous text. But a lot of people, are like, *Oh, it's a comic book.* I'm like, *No, no, no, no, no. It is not*. Complexity and rigor, you can get away with bringing in pretty much anything that you want to teach, depending on the standard you're trying to cover, depending on the assessments that you're wanting to do.

We have a lot more freedom than we think we do. We have to educate our administration a little bit sometimes or our department heads. There's a reason why we need to bring in paired texts. There's a reason why we need to read entire books and not just excerpts. Because, like you said, in Oklahoma City there was that push to not do whole novels and that's how Classen ended up with a whole bunch of novels from other schools because they were like, *Oh no, we don't read books at Grant or Capitol Hill*.

NAJAH: That's where I was.

SUZANNE: Yeah. It was a thing. I remember that whole thing. We were like, *Oh, my gosh, how are you not reading the entire book? You've to read everything in context.* But you can find very complex, very rigorous poems. You can find rigor in short stories like the "Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." I mean, come on. There's a bunch out there. Just because a text is long or just because it's part of the canon, that doesn't mean that it naturally falls under that umbrella of being more

rigorous and, therefore, more complex. Like, *Pride and Prejudice*, just reading it—it's is a pretty straightforward story, you know, but you start bringing in the different perspectives, then that's where the complexity comes in. That's where the rigor comes in. That's where thinking comes in. Otherwise, it is just a love story, you know, and it's not just a love story.

SHAI: Right. I think even at the time, the problem was that the economic structure was shifting from one kind of economy to another kind of economy. Therefore, love was actually becoming a conversation, when it really hadn't been before. It was considered distasteful, explicitly distasteful, to have that conversation. Like *How on earth do you think that your opinion matters more? That like your emotional health matters more than the survival of your family? Who are you*? *How were you raised?* That's the conversation they were having back at that time. Women were not generally thought to have a self, much less the option to be selfish. And so, how you construct identity was a huge conversation then too. I mean, *Pride and Prejudice* is juicy—it's a juicy novel. But you have to interrogate it. You really do. And I think, coming back to the Banack article and what Connor observed, was that her concern about the novel seems almost to translate into a disdain for the canon itself. And I think that one of the great and powerful things about canon is A) if you add an 'n' it's fired at people, right?

[laughter]

SUZANNE: I love that! I'm writing that down.

SHAI: And B) Who is it targeting? Who is the canon targeting? Because it's specific people. And because of the people it marginalizes and because of the people it centers, it's always going to be allowed in a classroom. Sometimes that's a conversation we need to have. As Connor mentioned, it's not just what you allow in a classroom, but also as Najah mentioned, the levels of rigor that it incorporates. "We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard." I actually use that Kennedy quote in my classroom when we talk about this. Because that conversation will come up, *Miss why*? And I'm like, *You're not wrong. There are easier texts, but you are better than that. And you can do this. And the thing is, this is how people cut you out of the conversation about your own future*. Because let me tell you, legislation is not written like *Pride*. Legislation is written like *P&P*. Your end-user

licensing agreement that you have to have in order to use your phone and this kind of terminology, you have to be able to parse it for your own economic survival. For your own privacy, for your own actual existence in this world. These conversations, this language is not accidental, right? This is purposeful, so you should be able to contend with it on its own terms.

And I think that is a critical thing that we have to look at. Because when you look at the canon and who it others and who it includes, then you also look at how what translates downstream in terms of economic and other kinds of survival. Because there are kids reading these whole novels. These are the kids who are getting prioritized in spaces that are college based. No one is telling those kids, *Oh, college may not be for you. You can do fine without this*. They get that college isn't for everyone. Absolutely. But the thing is—colleges are very comfortable marginalizing and othering certain kinds of voices and centering some kinds of voices, as we've all experienced. It's not an accident what our campuses look like. It's not an accident how our housing is priced. And who serves whom in the cafeteria. Right? We've seen that—we know what that looks like. And that translates to access. If we don't build access in the curriculum to complex texts and long-form thinking and being able to track trends through history and through the evolution of texts, then we are actually building into that marginalization. We're doing that to our kids and we're complicit. So, I feel like we have a responsibility not to be, by making them do this stuff even when they don't want to and they *Yes-Miss* us.

NAJAH: That's so on point and… this is the thing that's wild about what's happening right now. I'm at the tail end of my master's program. And our universities… well, some universities are being very obtuse, like *Where all of our students of color? We don't know where they are.*

SHAI: They're in the cafeteria, y'all.

NAJAH: Right. What Shai said about, everybody isn't cut out for college is true. But how much do they say that at Classen SAS versus… they say it every day at Star Spencer. How much do they say it at Harding versus… they say it every day at US Grant. We know college isn't the only option, but I feel like we're taking the opposite shift, like *Hm, college is a waste*. Even now where universities are trying to diversify their texts. I'm taking 16th Century Brit Lit right now, but we're reading a book by Kim F. Hall about basically how Britain created racism. That's essentially what our thesis

is. And it's a fantastic book. But like there's two black students in my program and in my class. And it's wild.

So, everybody wants more representation in schools. We've all seen the memes go around social media like *How old were you when you had your first black teacher?* We've all seen this go around. And we don't build the information pathway that Shai was just talking about. Like if we only teach them short stories, then we have crippled their ability to handle the stamina of university. If we only have them writing a paragraph or two, we've crippled their ability to be successful. Not because they can't, but because we didn't teach them to.

I just really felt like some of it has to do with age appropriateness, like this conversation about having two novels—I don't know that I would do both of these for my sophomores. But seniors could get ready to do that. My sophomores don't necessarily need to be ready to do that, but juniors need to get in there, and seniors need to be there. Because they are capable. It's about being strategic and building the steps and about knowing when, and what matters more… vertical alignment. Like Shai said before, if you've given them the tools to critique the canon when they're young, then when they're seniors, reading Shakespeare is less drudgery because they already have the background of having read Elizabeth Acevedos or having read Cisneros.

SHAI: So often, we see kids look at intellectual classism in some ways, right? Because that is a thing. We haven't codified that yet, but it's totally there. So, we have kids looking at Shakespeare saying, *Oh wait, this is some whiteness… and it's not for me, I'm not in this, therefore I don't want it and it's not for me*. And the thing is, that if you're hiding access, if you're hiding the secret keys to access in society in these pieces, which we do. If you can name drop Walt Whitman, then you're going to be fine at certain cocktail parties. And that's true of the Chamber of Commerce just as much as it's true at university. If we're doing that by teaching children that these things are not for them and, therefore, they have the responsibility, because of their space in society, because of their social location, to disdain them. Then we don't need to marginalize people through class, because we're teaching them to do it to themselves [lots of nodding on the screen].

SUZANNE: Mmmm.

NAJAH: Yep [while snapping her fingers].

SUZANNE: Yeah, that's a good point.

SHAI: Let me tell you, I'm the weirdest thing to walk into Moore High School in a minute. So, when you talk about those memes asking *When did you have your first black teacher?* What about, *When did you first have your first non-Christian teacher?* Like, explicitly?

That's a conversation we are not having, and we need to have that here. Oh, I hit a bunch of different-not-from-around-these-parts buttons. At the same time, by owning the canon, that is something. And by teaching my kids that you can own the canon from wherever it is you are, then this is for you all, however many thousands and thousands and millions of years of evolution. And all the texts that we've created as a species belong to you. They all belong to you. History has conspired to bring you to this point, at this time in this place. And it is for you. That's what we're giving to our children.

I don't know how to articulate that really well. But culture is a gift we give to them. And they are a gift we give to culture. College, quote unquote, college may not help you in terms of vocation. But let me tell you, college needs your voice because… because it's not constructed for you. It's not constructed *for* you, because it's been constructed *without* you. And you may not need it, but it needs you. Higher education needs your voice, it needs your perspective. It needs your social class and ethnicity and all the different pieces, right? It needs you. As one of my professors, Dr. Houser, says, if you don't have access to at least three thousand years of human history, that is a poverty. Because it's your history—all of it is yours. The parts that are written and the parts that are told, and the parts that are left out. And it belongs to you, and you have the right to claim it.

Getting back to the paper, when you talk about this idea of real estate, history is real estate, and our legal code was canonized from 15th century British property law. Which is why it's so entirely incomplete in some ways to dealing with actual problems nowadays.
#Rittenhouse. But this is not dissimilar from the text of Austen's. It's not dissimilar from that kind of context and that kind of vocabulary, and that sort of usage. And with Austen, it's not just what's on the page, it's what is strategically left out for politeness. This idea of naming in that context is a very bold one. And I think it's important to have conversations about how these things are constructed and why they are in some ways insufficient. And why our kids' perspectives need to

become more present. That includes telling us why they don't like texts. They're allowed to not like books. One hundred percent. Tell me why you don't like it and make a case for why it's a problem.

NAJAH: For sure. I just wanted to point out in the analysis… and I'm glad that Banack noted this too… the way that a 17-year-old kid is analyzing gentrification… because I think that's the same point that we've been talking about. We have a tendency to infantilize our kids like that's something they don't think about. Just the same way it is in the novel is the way that they think about it. Like *why is it that my neighborhood is changing? Why is this business going to get shut down?* Those are the things that they think about. *Why did my school have to change the way that it did?* So, that was a really great point. And then the inclusion of Howard University and how Zuri would be interested in going to an HBCU and then moving back to the hood. This idea of class among black people. I was just really glad. I was waiting to see if she was going to skip over that internal dialogue about class among black people, and I was glad that she didn't. The way Zuri was like, *Hello, here comes some white people.* And then it wasn't—it was rich black people. And she was like, *Whoa.. well, what do I do with this?* Because I think that's something that our kids think about too. I would have benefited from seeing this novel as a kid because I didn't have knowledge… Like my grandparents were… I don't even want to say upper middle class, probably just regular middle-class. And I didn't have any experience with upper-class black people until I got to university. Seeing this was like, *Oh, so blackness doesn't mean poverty.* And the way that the Darcy family in *Pride* has to deal with being shunned by the other rich people for being black *and then* being shunned by the lower-class black people for being rich… I was like, *Whoa, those poor Darcys! Like they had a bad too.* And that was something that I think that would be good for kids to see.

SUZANNE: I remember when I was reading *Pride* a few years ago, I just kept thinking of the TV show, *A Different World*. There were a lot of episodes I remembered that seem to fit. So if you need to bring in another perspective, just bring in a couple of episodes from *A Different World*, to center those conversations. You know, intersectionality doesn't always dovetail nicely or it can splinter on ways that you don't expect. For instance, you think that money is going to protect you and then it doesn't. You think your skin color going to protect you and then it doesn't.

NAJAH: That was a great tie-in.

SUZANNE: I love *A Different World* so much. [laughing]

NAJAH: I had every intention of showing a few episodes of A Different World, had I stayed at those higher grades.

SHAI: I don't know if you're Tumblr people. I wasn't, but now I am. There's a Tumblr called Saved by the Bell Hooks. And it pairs Bell Hooks texts with Saved by the Bell images…

SUZANNE: Oh my gosh!

SHAI: And it's one hundred percent fire and magic. And I love it. You should check it out.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In listening to these four educators, the time seemed to fly by. To wrap up the conversation, the final question posed was, "What in the article or in this conversation has changed, challenged, or confirmed your thinking?" The teachers could answer the question or simply share their final thoughts. I count what each educator offered as pearls of wisdom for all those invested in ELA classroom practice.

CONNOR: I think doing all three of those things—combining, changing, challenging, or confirming—it just really highlights the importance of when you get to pick a text as a teacher… sometimes you are not given the choice. Sometimes it's, *Hey, you're doing these four things this year*. But when you're given the choice, whatever that choice ends up being, just having a good reason for doing that—having multiple good reasons, both from a social cultural perspective and from a skills and Lexile and those kinds of perspectives too—doing it intelligently and in a way that serves the needs of your students and your curriculum at the same time. Which is easier said than done. Trying to address all those things together and not just one of those things, that's what I got out of it, ultimately. When you can, really put thought into what you are teaching and *why*. It's not just the content of the book, but the length and complexity and learning to mix and match all of those things together.

SUZANNE: I really liked Banack's breakdown of the areas of CRT that she focused on and especially that she included her positioning of herself as a white woman in the conversation. I think that is really key, because when you think of an English teacher, she looks like me—a white women, middle class-ish. And when you're bringing texts from people of color or other experiences that you don't have that firsthand relationship with, you really have to do your homework. You really have to do the research and already have those expectations in your classroom about how you're going to have these discussions and make it a safe place for discussion for your students.

It's also important to realize you don't always have to have the answer. When I was an early teacher, I always thought, *I have to have all the answers and be super on top of things.* So, I wasn't always as open to bringing in my kids' voices as I should have been. That's something that you learn over time, as a teacher. And admit that you don't always have the answers, or you don't know the best way to go about opening up these conversations. But maybe there's a kid who does or he really wants to open up something. A teacher doing their homework, being prepared, and preparing their kids to have these conversations that are hard is important. These conversations are relevant, and they're only going to get more relevant as time goes on, I think, especially in our state.

So, asking, *Why do some people not want you to read these stories? Why do they not want you to be aware of these other points of view? Like, where's that coming from?* There are no easy answers for that. There's no little box that we can just take it out for a little while and put it back—because once it's out, it's out. And you can't put it back in its box. Which I think a lot of people want to do—to just put uncomfortable things away, but you can't. But if you do your homework, be approachable, have already established… You can't start the year doing a deep dive into gentrification and race issues and class issues the first week of school… it's just not going to work out. You've got to build up to those things. So, take your time, and how Connor mentioned, know your intentionality. Where is the intention with this? Why are you bringing it here? It's one thing to be like, *Yeah, I'm going to be the cool teacher. We're going to read Pride.* Why are you reading *Pride*? And if you can't answer that question, maybe not do it.

SHAI: So, my perspective in general is that *teaching is justice work*. I come from Trinidad. One of the things that we've always learned in our culture is that education is power and it's the only thing that is power. It's the one thing that they can't take from you. The one thing, that gives you

ownership of your life and of the world, is that you know things. And you know *how* to know things. If you want to talk about positionality, that's where I come from.

The other thing is that in my classroom, we have one big rule: *Everybody gets to be a person*. When you look at justice, when you look at giving people power, which is what education is… that's when you humanize the other and you humanize the self. You have a responsibility to treat all people like people, by giving them power and giving them equity. Making sure students have the space to like and dislike and interrogate texts and understand texts. Then what you're doing is… Because we're teachers. So, we're not just building learners—
we're also building citizens. We're building people who take ownership of their space and they exercise, in very explicit ways, their political power and the power of the voice, to not only participate, but also interrogate what's happening at their world. The idea of who is being represented in our classrooms, in our texts, and who is being marginalized in our classrooms… this conversation really reinforced that for me. Because one of the things I worried about when bringing *Pride and Prejudice* into my classroom is that it would marginalize a lot of my young white men, my young white cis-het men, explicitly, because those are the kids who've been taught to center themselves in a curriculum in the classroom, by history.

What this has told me is that there's a balance that I have to strike between welcoming my young men into this conversation by teaching them to do the work of centering themselves in it versus doing that work for them, so they don't learn how to do it themselves in relation to other people. That is a huge conversation that we're not having. Can we prioritize one set of people at the expense of another set of people? Which has led to all this anti-CRT nonsense, in the first place. The loss of privilege feels like marginalization. And that is a conversation that is hard for me to have as a teacher. When I make those exact decisions, Connor was talking about, I am, in fact, de-centering some people to include others. But I'm also asking all of them to do the work of centering themselves in every text. That is equally as true of Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" as it is for when I bring *Pride and Prejudice* in or if I bring in James Baldwin. So, these are conversations I'll have with myself going forward and this has reinforced the need for me to do so. I appreciate you all. Thank you.

NAJAH: That's really good. I think that question right there does challenge me like that. What does it look like to teach kids how to… And this is kind of a middle schools skill, but that text

connection: text to self, text to world, text to text. What does that look like as it matures up the ladder? Because when you're teaching it to middle school or to upper elementary, it's a very concrete thing. But when it's seniors and you're like, *Where are you in* Pride and Prejudice*?* Or *Where are you in* Pride*?* It's still the same concept. It's just a bigger, a more expansive version of that concept. And an idea that I think that is easy to forget, that we're not asking, like you said, *What about our white cis-het male students?* I think that that is where it seems like we're always targeting things. We're not asking them to identify with the patriarchy. In fact, that's been a conversation that's come about at my school like, *You're probably are not that close to the patriarchy. You're probably closer to my Black kids and my Latine kids than you are to the traditional patriarchy just because of where you live and where you go to school. So that's not what I'm telling you that you are.* And so how do you critique this rhetoric in this book or in this article or in this poem? How do you critique that and also hold on to whatever you consider your identity to be? That's a really important thing to hold and an important takeaway.

A lot of things were confirmed for me during this whole process. My biggest takeaway is just that I'm grateful that people are having these conversations correctly. When all this CRT stuff started happening, I thought that it was going to just be a total disaster. And I am very proud of, specifically, English teachers. And the way that we're pushing back. I feel like English teachers are doing a fantastic job of being like, *Ummm... Yeah, but no. These are the themes that are in the text. And we are going to continue teaching the themes in the texts, and we're going to continue representing our students.* For everyone on the panel, for Arianna Bannock, and all of that—English teachers are doing a great job, it seems to me. So, I'm excited.

SHAI: I will just say straight up. I actually really liked the article. I know I came at it with some notes right off the bat, but I really did like it. I'm just grateful that these conversations are happening and they're happening, as Najah mentioned, at this level. I think it's important.

We ended the conversation in great appreciation for the opportunity to talk about scholarship in a way that mattered to the work we do in our own classrooms and the work we do together. That's a great place to be—at the intersection of scholarship and classroom practice.

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