

Culture, Loss, and Silence: It's on Us

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Once you center their joy and make it relevant, they will learn.

—Islah Tauheed (2021)

One of the last trips I took in 2020 was to visit Chad Everett, assistant principal at Horn Lake Middle School in Horn Lake, Mississippi. My colleague, Elaine Millen, and I are studying excellent educational leaders. We followed Chad for two days: conferring with students and teachers, managing the cafeteria during lunch, racing—seriously, as fast as our legs would carry us—to assist a student in distress, and talking in between about all things education. Just two weeks later, schools closed and we began this unwelcome shift to online learning. Chad and I talked about reading soon after. He said, “If the culture of regular reading was not in place before we sent them home, there is no chance now” (C. Everett, personal communication, March 2020).

Ah, the culture of reading.

In Chad’s school, teachers have rich classroom libraries built on student interests, and his office is filled with books he can hand to a student sent to him for discipline. He feels the urgency to support teachers as agents of change who lead all students to rewarding reading lives. During the pandemic, Chad and his teachers made getting books in students’ hands job one. As Gholdy Muhammad said in *Cultivating Genius*, historically responsive literacies call for such “urgent pedagogies” (2020). We can dismantle

deficit thinking with a determined shift toward children.

You see, we used to lament summer reading loss, and after a year of unprecedented disruption, we now have all-year reading loss.

But stop.

First, a clarification.

The idea of “loss” is a muddled mess. As Inigo Montoya said in *The Princess Bride*, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” You can’t call it “learning loss” until we agree on what counts as learning and how we determine with integrity that it has or has not occurred. We have no agreement on this in American schools. With reading, we can’t say that reciting a few things *about* a book, *but not reading it* counts as reading. In so many schools, the loss of reading relevance and joy is as systemic as white supremacy simply because teachers make all the choices about what counts as reading.

I’m certain we all want sustained engagement across hundreds of pages, one book after another. We want students to deepen their thinking about this life in all of its complexity year after year—no matter whose class they’re in. That’s a culture of reading. But yes, I would agree that it has been lost for some time in many schools. However, there is a solution. As Katherine Bomer says, “We need an air of expectancy

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with every child—which means showering them with all things good. An air of expectancy means we see what is brilliant and genius inside them.” Amen. It means *we see them*. We give them books to read about issues and ideas that matter to them

so that engaged reading happens both inside and outside of school. Many students are unlikely to seek books without us, and too many children simply won't *have* books without us.

So here we are.

Authentic reading is essential, yet I wonder if schools have lost it like we "lose" a tight-fitting skirt in the back of the closet once those pandemic survival cookies begin to collect around our waistlines. We push aside what we don't want to face—and this idea that independent reading identities are our responsibility seems complicated. Yet the National Literacy Trust found in 2017 that kids who *enjoy* reading outperform their peers by a widening margin: from 1.3 years at age 10 to 3.3 years by age 14 (Clark, 2019). Those who enjoy reading read more. And which factors support otherwise unwilling readers? Personal satisfaction and easy access to a wide range of books. We can look past this and pull out copies of a whole-class novel, but that also gets tricky, doesn't it? You've heard that certain novels are essential for our culture. But who's culture?

We have to stop eating up so much class time with pretend reading. Swap the tired United States history textbook (that no one reads) for *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer-prize-winning look at what slavery tells us about our culture today. Students will wake up, trust me. Not just to engage, but to question and explore and seek to understand. Trade the slow weeks spent on *The Lord of the Flies* and *Huckleberry Finn* with books clubs centered on social justice. All students will read more. Simply put: More reading matters. It matters now. It mattered before. It matters whether we're in a room with students or online.

Everything is harder with remote learning. It has revealed how much schools rely on compliance—and how far that is from engagement. The kid who turns off his camera might be the same kid in class with eyes open but his mind elsewhere. When forced online, I started my 2020 year with book clubs because my first goal was to bring students back into a community of readers. Online, yes, but not alone. To get my students talking, I selected a range of titles that would invite conversations about race and white privilege and the systems that suppress brilliance, that stereotype and intimidate people, and that prevent us all from living in community. We had two rounds of book clubs of four weeks each. The students chose two books from a list of nine, six of which explicitly deal with race. Every one of my students read one of these: *The Nickel Boys*, *Sing, Unburied Sing*, *We*

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Are Not from Here, *Dear Martin*, *Long Way Down*, and *We Are Here*. Student-initiated conversations crossed into big territories: immigration, xenophobia, mass incarceration, police brutality, poverty, why #BlackLivesMatter, and mental health. We talked about the coronavirus and its outsized impact on communities of color. The *books* drove engagement and deep thinking.

Kieran, a first-year university student and member of the ROTC, was unsure what to make of #BlackLivesMatter from his northern New Hampshire town. He went to an almost all-white high school, and the media he consumes will not steer him out of that lane. Yet he said during a meeting this fall, "*Dear Martin* is helping me understand what is happening in the world right now . . . and I *want* to know. I mean, why couldn't we read books like this in high school?"

I flashed back to a discussion between one of my seniors in high school, one of Kelly Gallagher's seniors in California, and a Miami University student who were discussing *All American Boys* in a shared Google Doc that connected students across the country. Zoe, from my class, said how much it meant to her that she could talk about issues of race with others, since those conversations were not happening in the halls of her mostly white high school. The MU student said she gave the book to her boyfriend (a Louisville, KY, police officer) when she finished it, because she wanted him to think about race and policing. This prompted Kelly's student to say he was giving the book to his uncle, also a police officer, for the same reason. These conversations were not anomalies. When we put relevant books in the hands of teenagers, they question and imagine solutions.

My book choices this fall created thorny conversations, for sure. And I wished I had Julia Torres or Cicely Lewis or Andrea Nacina Cole in my classroom to lead me, because I still have so much to learn—so much of my own antiracism work to do. But all my students had was me. All your students have is you. Remember the mantra of the Freedom Writers? "If not you, who? If not now, when?" I asked students to listen and to question, to rephrase, and to challenge our assumptions. We learned together. Sure, it was wobbly work at times, but it was better than pretending reading isn't urgent and relevant now.

In a multiracial democracy there is no defense for an English curriculum of all white authors. There never was, you know that. But the fight for change can look like a maze of cactuses. We'd rather put our heads down, perhaps, and avoid considering the impact of that choice.

We can remain unconscious of curriculum since the decision about which books to teach is often made far from our classrooms. (A pity, certainly, but too often true: Those in power rarely give teachers the agency to make important decisions.) But we still have choices, and they begin with what we commit to.

For me, I will not ignore a culture of pretend reading.

I have braided two big ideas into this essay so far: culture and loss. There is an ancient power in the number three, so I have one last subject for you: Silence.

We've all seen social media elevate conversations about race and school curricula. But how many white teachers who are bold in tweets are as bold in their English department conversations? This is big work and it is small work: Significant change begins in *your* classroom and *your* school. Which of the factors that research aligns with adolescent engagement are present in your school's curriculum right now: choice, relevance, personalization, and the social nature of learning? Or do we accept none of the above?

I won't forget the stand-off one afternoon at a high school department meeting when a colleague said with a great deal of fire, "I won't let anyone leave my classroom without understanding the importance of the green light at the end of the dock in *Gatsby*."

And I said, "I am determined that no one leaves my classroom without reading—really reading—a book." The uncomfortable silence that followed is something we all seek to avoid. Cornelius Minor reminds us, "There are far too many people in agreement with injustice. Expect people to disagree with you. One aspect of white supremacy culture is conflict avoidance. In our roles as builders, destroyers, healers, and organizers, we will upset others" (2021). More than a few of my colleagues were upset that day. But we simply must recognize that all teachers have clear, specific, and measurable commitments that drive all kinds of decisions we make each year. You have to ask: What do I make time for? What do students gain and lose when I make that choice? The urgency of now requires us to move. When children return to you this fall, many will have not read a book for a year—and many more for many years. If that matters to you (and please tell me it does), what will you do to change that?

When I first made the transition from high school to college teaching, I expected to meet students ready and willing to read. Three girls arrived early to slurp iced coffee and show me TikTok videos. Prompted by spoken

word poetry, they were soon deep in thought, writing and fiddling with words in notebooks. They slumped back against their chairs, however, when I handed them books. They came to college having learned to not expect much in those pages. We taught them that. When I saw them unwilling to stop reading a week later, I smiled. It wasn't me, of course, it was the books that kept them reading. Elizabeth Acevedo and Tiffany D. Jackson did the hard work of engaging them; I just gave them choices and time to read.

In the high school English department I was in for 21 years, our meetings circled questions of relevance as teachers worked to connect a classic novel to the events of today. They worked hard, but those efforts rarely increased reading. What do we lose when students stop reading? If standardized tests are the measure, our most well-resourced schools will say not much. High

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test scores are often used to justify a curriculum where almost no one reads. But those of you reading this—you know. We lose an opportunity to be the change we seek in this world.

I recorded an interview with my seniors to show how choice and personalization had transformed so many young people (my colleagues' former students) from disinterested readers to empowered ones. I shared it in a department meeting and endured the uncomfortable silence that followed. You know I wasn't welcome at their lunch table, but I refused to pass on only the curriculum my mother (who is 86) remembered from high school. She found *East of Eden* fascinating and *1984* haunting—terrifying, even. But now? Most teens meet these texts with a ho-hum shrug and fake read for weeks. Too many teachers shrug back, "We've got to get through this. It's in the curriculum." *Please*. We hand out only novels written long before students' grandparents were born and call that the best we can do? *We can* find a balance. *We must*.

What if we saw contemporary books as a portal: an opportunity to bring the past forward, to make history relevant now? It isn't that modern books ignore history—it percolates in the events characters live through. And it isn't that the book alone works on us; we personalize reading as we bounce the ideas there against our understanding of the world. What is literature if not an opportunity to look both in and outside of yourself and your experiences? This is the conversation in book clubs when we ask, what does this book say to you? The personalization of reading is unpredictable, yes. Is it challenging to keep all students reading in our

classrooms? Yes. But necessary? Yes. Now.

During this pandemic I have tuned into television I have rarely watched in the past. Episodes of “Love It or List It” have stolen hours. When people are looking for a new house, the word that bothers me the most is *need*. Everyone seems to *need* a larger closet. We use that word carelessly, incompletely. Our needs trample others’. How do we determine what students need from the reading and writing lives we hold captive in middle and high school? Who do we serve: students or curriculum? If you avoid this conversation with colleagues, you may be more popular with them, but students you’ll never meet will be denied their right to find literature relevant and personal. Your school will never develop a culture of wide reading if you don’t face the silence we find so comfortable. And that’s learning loss we can’t deny.

Jason Reynolds revealed in a keynote address last fall that he never read in high school (2020). He said he wants to tell his former English teachers, “You traded *my* engagement for books *you* cared about.” You might start the conversation in your school with that simple truth. Have the courage to create a culture where young people wrap themselves around the haunting importance of *King and the Dragonflies* and *Dig* and *This Is My America* and *Furia*.

Books are brave and true. Are we?

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