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Unit of Study: Literature That Confronts Racial Injustice and Discrimination

Rationale:

As a minority student and a future educator, I believe it is essential to teach anti-racism. Conversations about police brutality, racialized violence, societal prejudices, and institutional racism are intensifying as Americans acknowledge how deeply ingrained racism is in American society. America is a country full of children of diverse cultures, backgrounds, influences, and identities. It is because of our diversity that instructors must acknowledge the racist biases that have or will affect the young adults in their classrooms in nearly every aspect of their lives, including education. Countless racially motivated tragedies have happened in recent years that help to bring the topic of racial inequality to the forefront. Many of these events deeply affect the lives and futures of the young people in our classrooms, making this unit of study especially relevant. Despite being young, many children experience firsthand racism and discrimination by the time they reach high school.

Racism and discrimination are issues that have existed since the formation of this country and although progress has been won, discrimination persists in American institutions and society. I completed my observation hours at Alta Vista Highschool, a continuation school where many of the students are from marginalized communities who have had first-hand experiences with the biased institutions that perpetuate cycles of oppression. The instructor of one of the classes I observed created a unit around Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* play. I think this was brilliant because it presented a historical story in the form of drama that offers several characters with whom students can identify culturally, sociopolitical, and emotionally. This play can also fit into Mary Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life Experiences, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival from her book *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. However, the *Zoot Suit* play might not be called canonical so I have chosen Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* for this unit*.* Although discrimination and injustice are heavy topics, I would like to make the classroom a safe and inclusive environment for students to speak about their beliefs and concerns.

 Writing has always been an integral form of protest against countless types of inequalities which is why so many books find themselves on banned book lists. *To Kill a Mockingbird* addresses the oppressions based on race and status within the society of the deep south during the 1930s. The story unfolds through the eyes and voice of a young girl, Scout, whose father is a defense lawyer for a Black man accused of raping a White woman. This canonical work has frequently been used to explore racism and is arguably critical of racial prejudice. However, I think using this text in a racial literacy unit could also introduce students to alternative perspectives. Together we can consider the extent to which this text can be critical of racism. The text is written by a White woman and told from the voice of a little White girl. What part does the privileged White woman play in the storytelling and how accurate can she be in the narration of racism that she does not experience firsthand? Students might also explore the idea that Atticus Finch is portrayed as somewhat of a white savior. There are many voices of oppressed people in the novel that students could look deeper into and contemplate the effects of those unexplored voices to develop their own opinion of the novel, its narrative, and even its place in canonical literature.

 It is important to look at the literature of our past and even consider how it was received or analyzed previously. It is important to look at literature from a present-day perspective on racism in order to empower young adults and better equip them to stand against racism now and in their futures. This method of addressing oppression and injustice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* can also be paired with a number of noncanonical works. Because *To Kill a Mockingbird* fits well into Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life Experiences, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival, there are many directions this unit could take and books to accompany the text. I would like to focus on the aspect of real-life discrimination with a class and by studying how these injustices are presented in the literature, students can more confidently identify them in their lives where they are bound to encounter them.

**Introducing the Text:**

1.

When considering this work as a centerpiece for a unit, I would compliment it with music and poetry from diverse voices, especially because Harper Lee’s novel is written by a White woman and told by a young white girl. It is important for an instructor to know their audience and student demographics. It is okay to include canonical works written by White people but it is problematic to exclusively present text from white people, especially when discussing racism and inequality. Thus, to help introduce the text of *To Kill a Mockingbird* I would present music and poetry pieces such as Lauryn Hill’s “Black Rage,” Taina Asili’s “No Es Mi Presidente,” and Raye Zaragoza’s “In the River.” Providing music from contemporary voices from marginalized groups exposes young adults to people they might relate to or empathize with. All three of these protest songs are sung by women who are speaking of their personal and their communities' struggles and pain. Racism has affected these women and influenced their lyrics. Students can observe the issues that have been present in American society for generations.

Music and poetry from people who experience the firsthand marginalization and oppression of today's American society can introduce the oppression described in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Listening to the music and reading the lyrics of the artists, I can ask students to choose a song that they prefer to analyze. These women provide students with powerful songs from their much-needed perspectives aiding such a complex unit as this one. Thus, I would ask students to consider how their chosen song is representative of the America they are familiar. Have they heard of, witnessed, or even experienced any of what is discussed in their song? I would ask them to choose one part of their response to consider sharing with the class as a whole. Because this is such a complex and often personal topic for many people, I would let students know this beforehand so that they can prepare themselves with something they are comfortable sharing with the class. What is helpful about this music activity is that the text is compact and can be examined in a less time-consuming lesson.

2.

Following the music, I would provide students with the TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She draws attention to the negative influence of stories being told from a single perspective. Adichie reflects on her childhood growing up only seeing White people in books and how it affected her “impressionable and vulnerable” (Adichie 1:43) young self. She never saw her or her culture portrayed and she is not alone in this experience. Some narratives can be unintentionally or intentionally harmful or exclusive. The impact of this should be addressed. It is important to consider “how [stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, [and] how many stories are told” (Adichie 9:25) to determine the validity of the stories and who is being affected by them. Often, people in power use stories as tools to oppress entire groups of people. One example of this is in the single-story narrative of Mexican immigrants. She points to how the media can use stories to define entire groups of people, perpetuating institutional and social racism. She concludes her talk by emphasizing the importance of including diverse voices in storytelling to portray the larger picture rather than one perspective.

The TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an extraordinary video and a good transition from the introductory music assignment to the central canonical novel of the unit. The three women offer perspectives from communities that are not always heard from in society. Presented in an academic setting, instructors can encourage young adults towards tolerance, respect, and understanding of cultures that are not discussed in the classroom but are every bit as deserving of a seat at the table. The TED Talk can help students to understand this, especially when it comes from a woman of color who has experienced the consequences of a single story. Biases can be perpetuated in culture, but they can also be combated. Thus, it is important that students consider the influence of the single story before they begin reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a story about racism told from the perspective of a young White girl*.* It is a work that is generally considered critical of racism, but I would like students to determine that for themselves.

3.

 Finally, when introducing the central canonical text itself, I would explain some of the histories around the construction of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is key for students to understand the sociopolitical climate surrounding the issues addressed in the novel. Although the novel is a work of fiction, it is based on the realities of American history and the treatment of one of the many disenfranchised communities. I could discuss the history of the time the book is set in as well as the time when the novel was written to help students better distinguish implicit biases made by the author. Regarding issues such as the criminalization of minorities, racial violence, and the civil rights movements, students can compare and contrast the difference in the decades made in progress. I might use news articles from previous years but I could also use more recently published articles recounting current events and the sociopolitical climate of America today.

 As we read this text as a class, students will reflect on the readings. Every few chapters or every class, students will begin by responding to a prompt discussing the central text, a complimentary text, a current event, or something related to the topic of racial discrimination and injustice. We will have class discussions about the perspective of the story, student interpretations, the historical context of the novel, its relevance today, and more contemporary texts. Providing students with perspectives other than the typical White narrative will encourage them to be critical of the story and the storytelling provided in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and other texts.

Continuing the multimodal approach to this unit, I will also provide students with clips from movies such as *Fruitvale Station* or *13th*, as well as excerpts from outside texts. The unit will conclude with an essay that asks students to make a claim about the central text and its historical significance or compare and contrast it to another text.

**Beyond the Canon**

 It is important to give students a well-rounded perspective on a topic like injustice. There are many communities that are victims of racial prejudice and discrimination, so I would like to introduce them to more voices and perspectives. They should be exposed to stories of different marginalized groups by a variety of voices, not just the voice of a White author who dominates the canonical narrative. There is a vast array of young adult texts that can accompany *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

1. *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers

This young adult novel is about a 16-year-old, Steve, an aspiring filmmaker who is on trial for murder and facing the death penalty (Certain). While in custody he manages his stress and fears by writing a movie script that is based on his trial (Certain). The story alternates between the movie and Steve’s journal, displaying his struggle with his choices and his situation (Certain). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival.

This could be a good companion text because it not only portrays the struggle of a character of a marginalized group but it was written by a person of color as well. Similar to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the story discusses the incarceration of a person of color, but it does so from a voice that is other than White, breaking away from the canonical text, and giving life to the conversation around the incarceration of Black youth. Students can relate to and make connections to contemporary social issues and events regarding police brutality and incarceration which they may have had first or second-hand experience with.

2. *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas

*The Hate You Give* has become increasingly popular since it was published in 2017 and it has since been turned into a movie. This young adult novel is written by a woman of color about a young woman of color whose best friend is fatally shot by police (Lachman). It discusses the timeless issue of police brutality in the Black community. Although this issue is often viewed from an outside perspective by communities that are not as affected by racial prejudice, namely White people, police brutality and the murder of marginalized youth, especially Black youth, is a traumatic reality for many communities. This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. This is a story inspired by real events, from the perspective of people of color, and written by a woman of color. Even more contemporary than *Monster*, students can relate to the references to popular culture (Lachman) as well as draw connections to recent social issues and events regarding police brutality. I might include clips from the movie in my unit plan.

3. *The Port Chicago 50* by Steven Sheinkin

This is a young adult novel that recounts the historic struggles of African Americans in the U.S. Navy (“The Port Chicago 50.”). When an explosion in a segregated Naval base killed over 300 sailors, 244 men refused to return to work in unsafe conditions until their concerns were addressed and fixed (“The Port Chicago 50.”). 50 of these men were arrested for mutiny and faced execution (“The Port Chicago 50.”). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. A novel like this pairs well with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and this unit because it provides another perspective on how minorities were treated during this time in history, and how disenfranchised people fought for themselves. It is also important to note that this historical book does not make Black people who face discrimination the background characters in the same way that Lee does in *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

4. *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

This young adult novel is written in response to the Zimmerman Case (Bates). The novel is about a young Black boy who was beaten by local police and a boy who saw this happen but pretended not to (Bates). Like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the town splits in support as part of the community fights for justice and another part of the community reveals its deep-seated racism (Bates). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. Similar to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this novel discussed racial profiling in a more contemporary setting. Although this is a fictional story, this novel is eerily similar to countless incidents of police brutality aimed at minorities and people of color.

5. *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez

*Out of Darkness* is about a Mexican American girl, Naomi, and her tragic love story with a Black boy (Perez). The novel tells the story of a young woman in 1937, leading up to a deadly school explosion in East Texas (Perez). Before the explosion, Naomi struggles to adjust to the segregated oil town she moves to (Perez). She meets Wash and their love blooms despite their parents' disapproval and the racial prejudices of the people around them (Perez). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. This is a good addition to the unit because it provides students with another perspective on marginalized people in history. I think it is also important to provide texts from more than one marginalized group of people.

6. *All My Rage* by Sabaa Tahir

This is a young adult novel written by a Pakistani American woman (Kambhampaty). It is a love story and a tragedy about a Pakistani girl, Noor, who emigrated to the U.S. after her family is killed (Kambhampaty). She must struggle with culture shock and the feelings of not belonging as she discovers the meaning of home (Kambhampaty). The story also offers the perspective of Noor’s love interest, Salahudin who struggles with his own sense of belonging and longing for his culture that he feels unable to grasp in American society (Kambhampaty). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. I include this young adult novel because it offers another perspective from a different group of marginalized people and is told from the perspectives of marginalized people. It also displays the effect that American culture and the biases ingrained in American society and institutions can have on minorities.

7. *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon

*Light It Up* is a story about a young girl who is shot and killed by a police officer when she is walking home (“Summary And Reviews Of Light It Up By Kekla Magoon.”). It is a tragic story about the strength of a community in the face of injustice. This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. This is a great addition to the unit because it provides another contemporary voice for young adults that contrasts the events of the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is also told uniquely in that it provides multiple perspectives in a series of vignettes. It is important to subject students to different formats of storytelling like this one.

8. *When They Call You a Terrorist (Young Adult Edition)* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bbandele

This is a memoir that reflects on the #BlackLivesMatter movement [“When They Call You A Terrorist (Young Adult Edition).”]. This book is a product of one of the co-founders of the movements and provides young adults with photos and journal entries [“When They Call You A Terrorist (Young Adult Edition).”]. The book offers young adults a deeper understanding of the movement and the resistance it faces for threatening America’s prejudiced ways of thinking and people's hostile actions towards Black people [“When They Call You A Terrorist (Young Adult Edition).”]. This book is adapted specifically for young adults to help them understand the movement and inspire them to stand against racism in a culture that condones it. This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. Although this book is nonfiction, it speaks to young adults in a sophisticated way and validates what many young adults from marginalized communities already feel and experience.

9. *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline

*The Marrow Thieves* is a story about an apocalyptic future set in Canada, where climate change and pollution have devastated the landscape (Dimaline). The indigenous people are being pursued by government officials who kidnap them and force them into facilities where it is believed Natives are used for bone marrow research to restore dreaming to White people (Dimaline). The main character is Frenchie, who is saved from the government agents and flees with a group of young natives from different nations (Dimaline). The indigenous travelers are loyal to each other, believing their strength is in numbers (Dimaline). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. This novel can be paired with Harper Lee’s novel because it offers students an exciting story outside of the traditional canonical telling of prejudice and injustice. It is a fictional story and is nontraditional, but it addresses many of the fears about exploitation and injustice of marginalized communities through a story students can engage with.

10. *Internment* by Samira Ahmed

*Internment* is a young adult novel that highlights the political state of American society (“Internment.”). It is set “15 minutes in the future” and tells the story of 17-year-old Layla who is forced into a Muslim American internment camp with her parents (“Internment.”). This novel portrays the strength of marginalized people and their ability to fight for freedom and bring about revolution (“Internment.”). This text connects to Warner’s Chapter 4: Books about Real Life experiences, Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival. It is the type of novel that helps students realize that the horrors of history are not far from being tomorrow's realities, especially if we ignore injustice and allow it to persist.

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