



## Transgressive teaching: Pedagogic practices and the aesthetic representation of racial politics within classrooms

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### Abstract

Henry Giroux, the founder of critical pedagogy, in an interview suggested that education cannot be neutral and those who argue for the neutrality of education are arguing for a kind of education wherein nobody could be held accountable. A response to this neutrality ought not to be an acknowledgment or a denial of the neutrality, but rather an investigation into what is it that makes education non-neutral. This calls for speculation into the classroom as a space and the pedagogy imparted in that space. The classroom comes with multiple identities of race, class, gender and so on. This paper explores the nuanced politics of racism in classrooms through their aesthetic representations via a documentary entitled *Teach us All*, a graphic novel by Jerry Craft called *New Kid* and E.R Braithwaite's novel *To Sir With Love*. Using Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientizacao*, or critical consciousness, and bell hooks' idea of engaged pedagogy to encourage critical thinking among students, the paper analyses how a 'Freirean' or a 'hooksian' method of teaching can enable a student to understand racism as a social evil and to provide a space for countering such evils.

**Keywords:** Racism, pedagogy, conscientizacao, classroom

### Introduction

For a long time, racism has been an all-pervasive issue, manifesting itself not only in workplaces, the columns of a newspaper but also inside classrooms. This paper delves into the nuanced politics of racism in classrooms through their aesthetic representations. For this purpose, I have taken a documentary entitled *Teach us All*, a graphic novel by Jerry Craft called *New Kid* and E.R Braithwaite's novel *To Sir With Love*, alongside critical works on pedagogy such as bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to analyze how a 'Freirean' or a 'hooksian' method of teaching is the need of the hour.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, a clinical psychologist interested in the development of racial identity among African-Americans growing up in white communities, suggests that the stereotypical image that one has about the other is based not on what one has read, has been told, or has seen on the television. Instead, it is based on what one has not been told: stereotypes, omissions, and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice. (*Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the Cafeteria*).

She makes a distinction between prejudice and racism and refers to David Wellman's definition of racism as being a system of advantage that had race as its basis. Thus, racism is:

not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals (Tatum 23).

As racism is such a system of advantage, there is the dominant group that lays down the parameters within which the subordinate group is to operate. The whites form the dominant group and exercise control over the blacks. Their power is manifested in the denial of jobs or housing to people of colour as it serves the interests of the whites. Audrey Thompson, in her article "For: Anti-Racist Education", speaks of the privileges of being a white person and suggests that this privilege that is granted to whites is

naturalized. Racial stereotyping becomes useful in this regard. By showing the people of colour as thugs, thieves, etc, whites are "made to appear deserving of the privileges they enjoy" (Thompson 12). Tatum speaks of two kinds of racism – active and passive. Active racism refers to what she calls "blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and classification" (Tatum 23). On the other hand, passive racism is self-perpetuating, more subtle forms of which might include laughing at a racist joke.

### Desegregation and Education in *Teach Us All*

The documentary *Teach us All*, that explores the condition of education in public schools in a few states in America, begins with a conversation with a few members of The Little Rock Nine. The Little Rock Nine were a group of nine African American students who attempted to enroll at their local school following desegregation. They recount disturbing episodes of active racism as their attempts were met with counter attempts. To prevent their entry into school, a mob of white segregationists had gathered and chanted: "Two, four, six, eight. We ain't gonna integrate" (*Teach Us All* Sonia Lowman). They also spat on the African American students. Terence Roberts of the Little Rock Nine remarks:

I saw pure hatred, absolute spittle coming out of their mouth...[they] use[d] weapons, physical force, push[ed], shove[d]...". (*Teach Us All*, Sonia Lowman)

Sybil Hampton, another member of the Nine, remembers how nobody in the class talked to her for the three years that she studied there. They were shunned and not treated as equals. The situation had become so tense that the president had to intervene. Hampton further speaks that she had to bear it all, had sacrificed much in order that the future generation could get more opportunities and lead a better life. Terence speaks in the same vein. bell hooks, in her work *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, describes her learning experience before integration and mentions how her teachers in school, who

were all black women, were “committed to nurturing intellect” (hooks 02). They were dedicated to their work in order to produce scholars and thinkers – “black folks who used [their] minds” (hooks 02). There was a realisation that such a kind of learning would counter the hegemonic strategies of the whites. School had been a place of ecstasy for her. It had provided an individual the space where all garments of conformity could be shed and a person could be himself. School was where risks were taken and ideas that were opposed to the learning imparted at home were grasped and implemented. Post integration, the classroom had ceased to be a place of pleasure for hooks. However, this did not mean that the school became apolitical. It was still a political space since black students had to “counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn” (hooks 04). Decades after desegregation, classrooms remain politically charged spaces. The documentary moves from desegregation to modern times. It traces the condition of public schools and the state of the people of colour in such schools. Institutional racism, defined as instances “when institutions or organizations, including educational ones, have standard operating procedures (intended or unintended) that hurt members of one or more races in relation to members of the dominant race”, become apparent (Scheurich and Young 05). The documentary shows how schools with a larger percentage of people of colour have more metal detectors installed which again evokes the stereotype of the black man as a thief or a criminal. De facto segregation (segregation that occurs by fact and not by legislation) has continued so that several public schools are left with a majority of coloured students who live in poor neighbourhoods. Funding to schools is not equitable. Public schools with white students receive more funds than public schools with students of colour. The quality of education is affected due to this. Furthermore, they are made to compel the students to discontinue their studies. Children in segregated schools often drop out before graduating high school and have more chances of going to jail. The documentary shows empirical data that indicates the rates of suspension is twice in the case of people of colour – both Latinos and African Americans. A black student in an interview mentions that his friends have been “pushed out” of school for trivial issues such as entering into the classroom wearing a hoodie. Apathetic or even vindictive teachers have worsened the situation. They have not been understanding towards the environment in which such black students grow up, where every day a family loses its member and every day is a struggle for survival. Bryan Stevenson, the founder of Equal Justice Initiative remarks: There are so many schools in the country where principals sound like wardens and teachers sound like correctional officers. (*Teach Us All* Sonia Lowman)

The documentary shows how a few students of colour moved to court against teachers who were demeaning and their teaching style was “grossly ineffective” (*Teach Us All* Sonia Lowman). Sitting in a classroom, another student of colour says that it makes her sad how teachers don’t even know their names.

### **Racial Identity in *New Kid***

Name is the most basic marker of an identity. In Jerry Craft’s semiautobiographical graphic novel *New Kid*, name acquires racist undertones. The protagonist is a twelve-year

old mixed-race boy called Jordan, who joins a prestigious private school called Riverdale Academy Day. Another new student of colour joining his class is Drew. On the first day, the students introduce themselves to their white teacher. The white teacher mispronounces Drew’s name as Deandre and apologises for her mistake. She calls him Deandre a few times in the novel. As Jordan discusses this incident with his friend, he mentions that a classmate had called him Maury, another student of colour. Soon Jordan gets an opportunity to interact with the only black teacher in the prestigious school – Mr. Garner. Jordan speaks to Mr. Garner about how only the black kids are called the wrong names. He advises him not to “read anything into it” (Craft 69) and suggests that it could possibly be because he is a new student. Immediately, a white teacher extends his greetings to Mr. Garner as he passes by them. He addresses Mr. Garner as ‘Coach Rick’. Mr. Garner has been working there for fourteen years. The underlying idea remains that a person of colour is not worth an identity. This is an instance of passive racism. The graphic novel abounds in such nuances of racist temperament. When the class is discussing issues such as slavery or civil rights, students stare at Drew and Jordan. Another incident is when there is a book fair in school. At the fair, among other sections, is the section of African American Escapist Literature. In this section are books on escape – from prison, slavery, poverty and gang life. The teacher in-charge enthusiastically hands out two separate books for two students – one white, the other black. The white student is given a book on magical adventure whereas the black student is given a book that has “won all the major awards for African American literature” (Craft 137). Jordan, who draws sketches, makes a satirical sketch depicting the difference between mainstream novels and African American novels. He mentions several points of difference between the hero of a mainstream novel and that of an African American one – the former wishes to “live better” (Craft 139), while the latter just wishes to live. Events such as these, which on the exterior mean no harm, can have a deep impact on the adolescent mind. Some others are both harmful on the inside and on the outside. When Drew gets into an argument in the cafeteria with a white boy and the white boy slips on an apple, their white teacher commands Drew to go to the Principal’s office. This disturbs Jordan as Drew was to be punished for a mistake that he didn’t commit. In a monologue strip, Jordan says: ...IT ALL BECAME TOO MUCH. TOO MUCH OF KIDS LIKE ME TRYING TO FIT IN. TOO MUCH OF GOOD KIDS BEING BLAMED FOR BEING BAD...AND WAYYYY TOO MUCH OF ME FEELING LIKE I’M NEVER IN CONTROL OF ANYTHING (Craft 214).

He stands up for his friend and the other students in the cafeteria, both white and coloured, follow suit. It is important to note here that racial prejudices are ingrained as they are inevitably a part of socialization. Some white individuals have been striving to unlearn racism and to forego their white privilege in order to create an equal world for all. Pedagogy can play a vital role in this case. This becomes evident from E.R. Braithwaite’s novel *To Sir With Love*.

### **Anti-Racist Pedagogy in *To Sir with Love***

*To Sir With Love* tells the story of Ricardo Braithwaite, a person of colour and his journey as a teacher in one of the poor neighbourhoods of London. Caryl Philips in his

introduction to the novel lauds it as a unique tale of pedagogy and racism:

This fine, and genuinely touching portrait of a post-war English working-class community coming face to face with a decidedly atypical West Indian man, has much to tell us about race, class and the education system in Britain. (*To Sir With Love* x)

After being demobilized post the war, Braithwaite struggles to get a job despite his exceptional academic qualifications. He is rejected at every interview for his colour. While he had not faced any discrimination in the aviation services, he has to encounter racism within the school and outside it. In the school, he has to bear with his colleague Weston's remarks that include calling him a "sunburned friend" (Braithwaite, 22), a performer of "black magic" (Braithwaite 54) and a "lamb to the slaughter...black sheep" (Braithwaite 11). In one instance, Weston goes to the extent of mimicking a "subservient Negro" (Braithwaite 84) but another colleague steers the conversation to a more neutral direction. This is an example of "White Talk" which is defined as the "language whites use to avoid or resist anti-racism...talk that serves to insulate White people from examining their/our own individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism" (Trainor 142). Evading the topic, remaining silent on the topic, or even responding with clichéd statements like "black kids don't perform well in academics because they don't study", can be called as "White Talk." This indicates an urgent need for an anti-racist attitude which Braithwaite brings about in his students. The notorious students assigned to Braithwaite are initially hostile to him. They refer to him as "blackie teacher" (Braithwaite 62) or "black bastard" (Braithwaite 65). He admits to the racial prejudice that "invaded [his] thoughts" (Braithwaite 25) when he faces the predominantly white class. He saw them as white and as white alone. Their poor living conditions did not matter to him. However, when the pranks of the students became unbearable, he decides to address them as adults and declares:

...from now on you will be treated, not as children, but as young men and women, by me and by each other." (Braithwaite 68)

This yields a positive response among students as they write in their weekly review that they were "pleased to be treated like grown-ups, to be talked to like equals" (Braithwaite 73). Thus, the classroom is transformed into a democratic space where a student and teacher become equals. He begins to take their background into account and to relate the lessons to it. With a new fervour, he teaches them by engaging in dialogue with them and showing them that "the whole purpose of their education was the development of their own thinking and reasoning" (Braithwaite 75). This brings about a change in the relationship between Braithwaite and his students and gradually they become like a close-knit family, sharing the most mundane and the most major details of their lives with him. hooks speaks of her days as an undergraduate student about the Women's Studies class, which brought together "ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices." (hooks 15).

By speaking of thinking and reasoning, Braithwaite sows the seeds of the Freirean concept of *conscientizacao*, or critical consciousness. It enables one to "perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." (Freire 36). Himself a possessor of critical thinking, Braithwaite

endeavours to endow his students with the same knowledge. Freire has described critical thinking as being essential for dialogue, which is understood as a way of learning and knowing. Deeply inspired by Freire, hooks put forth her idea of an engaged pedagogy "which necessarily values student expression." (hooks, 21). Critical awareness and engagement become paramount in such a classroom, which becomes a place of active participation both on the part of the teacher and the student. As they learn from Braithwaite, he learns from them. As they learn from him, they learn 'about' him, about his racial identity. He helps his students to overcome their misconceptions about the coloured people and lays the ground for an anti-racist pedagogy that requires as the first step to engage in a dialogue about racism. This becomes clearer as the novel reaches its climax when the mixed-raced student Seales's white mother passes away. The students arrange for a wreath to be sent to Seales's place but they refuse to attend the funeral. One of the students explains:

it's what people would say if they saw us going to a coloured person's home (Braithwaite 165).

Crestfallen and aghast, Braithwaite walks out of the classroom without uttering a word. He feels that his efforts and the love were all in vain and also despises them for their decision. However, the next day, the entire class arrives at the funeral. Thus, through love and engaged pedagogy, along with Freire's *conscientizacao*, Braithwaite is able to bring about a change in his students. Freire says that the great "humanistic task of the oppressed [is to] liberate themselves and their oppressors as well." Braithwaite serves as a paradigm in this case.

## Conclusion

Documentaries currently provide the only "real framework to make a political statement" (Zheutin 21). Independent filmmakers are driven by their own insistence to look at real people in real contexts, being affected by their social and political environments. As a work of non-fiction, the documentary asserts its truth-value within the frames in which it operates. Events are rendered truthful by simultaneously shifting between narration and photographs to prove the authenticity of the narration. When Elizabeth Beckford painfully admits that during her struggle to enter the school as a white crowd jeered, she felt glad that she "had on those sunglasses. At least some people would not see [her] crying" (*Teach Us All* Sonia Lowman). This comment is immediately followed by a photograph of Beckford where she is seen wearing sunglasses. In this way, the aesthetics of the photograph render the events narrated in the document truthful. In contemporary times, even the most serious documentaries include songs. This keeps the viewer engaged and also adds to the aesthetic effect of the documentary as a whole. An analysis of the lyrics of such songs can help understand the underlying meaning of it. For instance, in *Teach Us All*, one of the songs is 'This Could be Love', which includes deeply moving lines such as

You're the fight

Of my life

and

So come on, tell me your story

Yeah come on read me the lines ("Oh Gravity – This Could Be Love").

Both the lines suggest human solidarity and urge the viewers to engage in dialogue with the other. The first step

towards fighting against racism is talking about it. The documentary, thus, has a larger impact on the viewers as it fuses audio with video in a narrative framework. Teach Us All, which is available on YouTube, suggests the ways in which platforms such as YouTube have a far-reaching impact. The YouTube algorithm makes it possible to widen our perspectives. Often watching one video would lead to recommendations of similar videos on YouTube. This leads one to a wider range of information and ultimately to a deeper understanding of the issues.

The graphic medium incorporates images, sketches, etc. It foregrounds the image rather than the word. As the graphic novel focus on images, the number of words is less which allows a faster reading as compared to a novel. By doing so, it makes itself “accessible to more readers.” (Couser 35). It can also entice and attract consumers who are not “habitual readers” (Couser 35). A graphic novel is able to convey emotions and anxieties more vividly as the facial expressions of the characters need not be imagined. They are already available on the page. The graphic novel appeals even more to those readers who are artists themselves. Many graphic novels have come into existence as a significant portion of the youth is interested in reading such novels. Their growing popularity can be used to sensitise the readers. Many graphic novelists have done so, including Jerry Craft and Marjane Satrapi. Such graphic novelists have used the medium to speak about the issues that plague the world of today and the issues that affect them directly. In the context of racism, the graphic novel provides a space for propagating anti-racist ideologies. A white man reading Jordan’s story would be compelled to think of the many Jordans he might have met in school. It would direct him towards reflecting on his own behaviour and would be able to better understand passive racism. To the coloured readers of Jordan’s story, it provides a sense of solidarity as he would realise that the experiences he has had are the same experiences that other people of colour have to face.

When Abraham Lincoln had met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he had asked “Is this the little woman whose book made such a great war?”. Novels has always been known for their ability to expose and alter the politics in the world. They can push into action the leading intellectual and make the average reader aware. Novels such as E.R. Braithwaite’s *To Sir With Love*, by their very existence can alter the way in which racism is perceived by their inclusion in the curriculum. As it is a unified form in the sense that the novel does not contain images, it is also a suitable text for those educators who are still hesitant to teach films or graphic novels. Thus, the novel, the graphic novel and the documentary, through their varied aesthetics, are empowering forms which can bring about a change in the world by sensitising each individual.

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