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An Alarm for the Dreamers

*“The forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world.” -Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me**

Sixty-six years ago, Brown vs Board of Education deemed the racial segregation of children in public schools unconstitutional. This groundbreaking legalese ushered in a new era of equality for people of color. Regardless of skin pigmentation, all students could seek refuge in school as a homogenous haven. This eradication of the “separate but equal” doctrine in our Constitution consecrated education and equality, right? Because all students can attend the same school, that surely means education is equalized in 2020. The dichotomy between race and education is a distant memory of the 50s, hooray! Pardon the sardonicism beneath my tone, but believing racial discrimination was cured by this Supreme Court case is, how do I put this gently... stupid. Today in “modern” America, a chasm lies between school and equality. Despite the termination of physical segregation in schools, the curriculum remains a victim of racial discrimination. Although all students are welcomed inside a classroom, they are welcomed within the curriculum. Especially in the subject of English, the dominant white narrative monopolizes content. The same stories told 100 years ago are the same stories students hear now. Strange how the authors of those books share the same gender and race as those who control the curriculum. It must be a coincidence! Again, pardon my sardonic tone, but the lack of advancement, revision, or modification within literary content is pathetic. How can time change

but the literature curriculum within American high schools remain stuck? The answer is rather simple; it is so the Dreamers can stay asleep.

Analysis of the English curriculum at Bridgeport's Central High School and Fairfield's Warde High School exposed the effects of the systemic white-dominant narrative embedded within the English curriculum; prioritizing the whitewashed Classic Canon over racially diverse literature deprives students of educational truth while perpetuating racist ideologies. The enshrined whiteness of traditional curriculum teaches both students of color and white students racialized lessons about whose stories matter, whose voices are promoted, and whose version of history is acknowledged. This inequitable disparity is just a symptom of white privilege; an unearned, mostly unacknowledged social advantage white people have over other racial groups simply because they are white (McFeeters). Because the Classic Canon is primarily composed of white authors, stories created by minorities are neglected. Therefore, white students benefit from the curriculum because their perspective is glorified. When students understand and experience unbiased texts, they can examine racism in literature, society, and themselves. As a democratic state, the educational curriculum must recognize the existing inequalities that offend our pillars of justice and equality for which the nation allegedly stands. Failing to incorporate racially inclusive texts in high school English classrooms only cauterizes our country's wound of social injustice. However, embracing a diverse curriculum allows the wound cut by racism to naturally scar.

Investigating the internalized whiteness in literature required me to get involved within the community. I turned to two local high schools with polar demographics; Central High School and Warde High School. Although these schools are only 2.3 miles apart, they are two completely different worlds. Warde is located in Fairfield, Connecticut. The town itself holds an

average median household income of \$134,599 with 5% of individuals living below the poverty line (Fairfield, CT Demographic Data). Although Fairfield may be affluent, they are not rich in diversity. In 2018, 85.4% of the population was white with 14.6% minorities (Fairfield, CT Demographic Data). It is no surprise that Warde puts up similar numbers. The enrollment of white students rests at 76% and 14% minority (US News and Report). At a meeting in 2019, eight female students of color from Warde shared anecdotes from their lives, “One girl, a teacher at the meeting recounted, described how moving to Fairfield from a more racially diverse school district, she realized she was different for the first time” (Weiss). Fairfield's demographics reflect a new era of “white flight”; the phenomenon of white people moving out of urban areas, particularly those with significant minority populations, and into suburban areas (Swalwell). The average white student attends a school where 77% of the student body is of their race (Swalwell). This racial segregation is often linked with economic segregation, thus making sense why Warde lacks in racial diversity. Because the majority of Warde students are privileged by both class and race, there is no shock if their curriculum does not stray far from the dominant white narrative. However, I could not draw a conclusion without looking at the content of the classes. For this examination, I needed to interrogate an expert in the Warde English curriculum.

To prevent me from making a hasty generalization about the content of Warde’s curriculum, I sat down with the high school’s very own John Whaley. For over ten years, Whaley has taught a variety of English classes at Warde. This year he took on 9th grade English, Contemporary Global Studies, and Global Film and Literature. As a tri-chair of the Fairfield Education Association Antiracism Committee, Whaley’s passion for equitable curriculum was evident throughout our conversation. As we opened our discussion about the inclusivity of race in Warde’s English curriculum, the content of his 9th-grade class appeared progressive. He

explained that his selection of short stories, articles, and poetry are all by diverse authors. Names such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, W.E. Dubious, Angie Thomas, and Jhumpa Lahiri drifted through our conversation. Although Whaley does his best to avoid the basic white authors, complete evasion is difficult, “The canonical whole class texts are not diverse at all” (Whaley). Unfortunately, Whaley is still trapped by the Classic Canon’s grip. Despite doing his best to include an array of authors, he feels their 9th-grade curriculum is stuck within the “in the dark ages”. Authors like Shakespeare, Tom Sawyer, F.Scott Fitzgerald, and a plethora of other dead white men keep the Classic Canon alive and well. When asked about his feelings on the Cannon he stated, “I want to stay updated and relevant as opposed to locked into the colonialist classic veneration. Who needs that anymore?” (Whaley) Despite including a plethora of diverse voices into his students' lives, the entirety of the English Warde curriculum falls short of inclusion. Although Whaley has taken matters into his own hands, a majority of Warde teachers neglect the inclusion of diverse authors. Simply put, “I’m not going to equivocate or hedge my words. We’re not doing a good job” (Whaley).

At Warde, the inclusion of diverse authors appears to be based upon a teacher’s individual accountability. Aside from the token black authors like Langston Hugh or Zora Neale Hurston, racially diverse texts remain in the shadows. Whaley stated, “We have a huge book room, we do have quite a bit of diversity in the catalog. Now, how much of it do we use, now that’s a different story.” He continued to say, “We can include as many black and brown authors as we want but it means nothing if we don't use it.” Although the content exists, Whaley is not sure how much is actually used. Despite the existence of rich literature claimed to be in the book room, it appears most of it is unused. A book unread is worthless. Overall, it appears much of Warde’s diverse content never leaves the bookshelves.

Inferring from my discussion with Whaley, it can be concluded that a dominant white narrative persists through the English curriculum at Warde. Despite there being an array of authors to choose from, a majority of the teachers glorify the Classic Canon texts. If there is any inclusion of racial diversity, it is subjective. Even when a teacher like Whaley wants to break away from the bleached curriculum, the so-called wholesale archaic texts prevent them from escaping the Canon's grip. Despite individual efforts of integrating racially diverse content, the curriculum over-represents the white perspective. Thus, exhibiting a symptom of white privilege.

Although the lack of inclusivity was no shock to me, I wanted to understand why the teachers at Warde prioritized the whitewashed Classic Canon over racially diverse literature. In Whaley's opinion,

“I think we have a lot of teachers who are afraid of new and different. It's not that they're racist and don't want to include black and brown voices. No one is trying to create authoritarian right-wing crazy people. But a majority of what they're using is just bad literature, and we have so much more opportunity to introduce these kids”

There are a few explanations behind this fear. A lot of times teachers have been doing the same thing for years and find any sort of change utterly ridiculous. Unfortunately, what they know is infected by the dominant white narrative. Therefore, they will recycle the same whitewashed curriculum despite changes in the social climate. This theme is not specific to Warde, “Teachers from a white world, live in a white world, then go to a white school and college then return to the white world” (Borsheim-Black 1). Many teachers are numb to the neglect of diversity because they have never confronted their whiteness. Sometimes teachers just feel uncomfortable doing so, “We are not accustomed to discussing whiteness in our teaching” (Borsheim-Black 2). Teachers may be afraid of the emotions sparked by discussions of racially diverse texts or

concerned about volatile conversations. Some may resist pushing too hard on students with problematic racial ideologies like colorblindness because they are unsure how to properly teach whiteness (Borsheim-Black 2). Despite the reasoning, each of these excuses is unacceptable and can be deemed symptoms of white privilege. This whitewashing is responsible for maintaining the white culture as the dominant culture (McFeeters). Whether conscious or not, the denial of a diverse curriculum based upon these statements only feeds the flames of racism. Thus, further embedding the dominant white narrative into the English curriculum.

Upon further examination of my investigation into Warde's curriculum, I found the glorification of the Classic Canon is a pivotal reason as to why teachers neglect racially diverse texts. The Great Books thrive on the cultural dominance of whiteness, harkening back to an earlier canonical era where the canon had little space for women and almost no space for nonwhite writers and thinkers (Gross 38). In the book, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, the author Harold Bloom, created a list of writers whom he deemed to be the most important literary figures of the western world (Schwartz). Out of twenty-six writers, only four were women, all white. Only two of the authors were Latin American and none were black (Schwartz). Sure, this lack of inclusion could not be malicious for Bloom is, after all, a white man, "It only seems that the canon of American literature is "naturally" or "inevitably" "white" (Morrison, 139). The disregard for diversity within the Canon is no mistake, "There's a deep-seated cultural bias in favor of white male writers" (Schwartz). The perpetuation of whiteness within this self-proclaimed work is detrimental to the progression of diversity. The idea of the "Great Works" reinforces the idea that every book on the list is renowned. Because 93% of the books are by white authors, calling these books "classic" embeds white supremacy into literature. These texts only show the white side of the story while hushing the voices of racially

diverse authors. Glorifying these texts whitewashes the truth, thus protecting the facade of the white world. When these texts seep into the curriculum, as they have, students only experience a dominant white narrative. Although the Great Works are beautiful pieces of art, they are not the only stories told. Deeming these books “classics” and negating the existence of racially diverse authors directly endorses white supremacy. Enshrining them into the high school curriculum teaches students racialized lessons about whose stories matter, whose voices are promoted, and whose version of history is acknowledged. Thus, maintaining the foundations on what America was built on; white supremacy.

The glorification of these white works is simply ad hominem; these books are enshrined because they protect the systemic white-dominant narrative, not because they are the only groundbreaking literature on the planet. American literature is characterized by underlying and often invisible racial ideologies that have played a central role in constructing Whiteness in the United States (Borsheim-Black 7). Toni Morrison said it best, “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate is the clash of culture” (132). The enshrinement of the dominant white narrative within literature is meant to uphold white supremacy. It only makes sense that the people who invented the hierarchy of race are the ones who explain it (Morrison 126). It upkeeps the power in the hands of whites on top of the social hierarchy, “Literature does not only reflect race and racism in American society, but literature has also played a role in constructing race and racism in American society” (Borsheim-Black 7). In order to maintain white supremacy and the complacency of people of color, the Canon is filled with witnesses. Of course, these stories are then glorified in school, for education is the best way to maintain cultural normativity. White stories are told so white stories are learned so white

stories can be maintained. Injecting whitewashed literature only creates a whitewashed society. Prioritizing white authors and stories prioritizes whiteness

Although Warde's curriculum maintains the dominant white narrative, Central welcomed diversity with open arms. Just like Warde, Central's emphasis on an inclusive curriculum correlates with its demographics. While Fairfield was top of the most affluent towns in Connecticut, Bridgeport is ranked number 5 for Connecticut's poorest cities with their median household income is \$45,441 (Bridgeport, CT Demographic Data). The minority rate is an impressive rate of 79.7% percent; white 20.3% (Bridgeport, CT Demographic Data). Similar to the cities' minority rate, Central reflects similar demographics. The minority rate is 87% and white 13%, thus ranking 18 out of 230 for the most diverse public schools in Connecticut (Niche). Because of this enriched cultural demographic, I was curious to see if Central's curriculum, like Warde, reflected their population of students.

In order to analyze the curriculum of Central, I first had to learn about it from an expert; Bria Parkman-McCullough. For the past six years, Parkman-McCullough has taught high a variety of English classes including the standard 12th grade. She also teaches an African American Literature course, which Warde fails to offer. Upon discussion of the diversity within the curriculum, Parkman-McCullough mentioned that over the summer, she actually headed revisions within their department. After the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless other victims of police brutality saw a change needs to happen. During the interview, she stated, "One of my big pushes was to make sure the curriculum was inclusive of all voices. As you know it wasn't before." She continued to elaborate on the changes made, "This year our English 12 class is called voices in literature. So, it encompasses a bunch of different authors from different backgrounds. Not just racially." The unit she was currently



teaching contained more authors like Alice Walker, Amy Tan, and Sherman Alexie. It was almost as though Central's one unit contained more diversity than Warde's entire English curriculum. I asked if the embrace of this new curriculum was cohesive and accepted by most teachers, "Redesigning the curriculum has made a difference. Before this year it was kind of like oh that's the curriculum. I may go by it. I may not we'll see. Now, there is a lot of teacher voices involved, they are more invested in it and want it actually teach it" (Parkman-McCullough). This passion that drives these teachers is the basis of a diverse curriculum. If teachers care about inclusive texts, they will incorporate them into their class. If not, they will not.

Because of Parkman-McCullough's passion for inclusivity, she took matters into her own hands and broke free of the whitewashed curriculum. When I asked her about thought on the Canon she replied,

"My biggest pet peeve is the Canon. Who deemed these stories to be the standard? When we think about it, what these stories are about, who they're by, its standardizing whiteness. Putting whiteness at the forefront of everything. Whether it be the authors, the experiences. If we are saying these are the classics, we are saying these are the standards."

Parkman-McCullough exposes the core issue of the Canon; not only does it perpetuate whiteness, but it also makes it a norm. Students learn what is valuable and what is not. When students only witness the white narrative, that is all they learn to value. In reality, whiteness is not the norm. Our country is full of diverse voices waiting to be heard. Thankfully Parkman-McCullough developed a curriculum based on reality.

The racial diversity within Central's curriculum is a disruption to the domination of whiteness found within the literature. Parkman-McCullough shared the importance of this

disruption in the lives of her students, “When students see themselves in texts it is powerful. Sometimes students don’t have outlets. But when they are given something they can connect with it’s like another door for them.” Diverse authors help students understand themselves and their identity. One of the most important parts of literature is using it as a tool to better understand yourself. Because Central students can see themselves in literature, they can develop a greater sense of who they are. By hearing diverse voices and seeing themselves in literature, Central’s students attain educational truth. They can see that there is value in diversity, thus value in themselves. Overall the diverse curriculum at Central shows racially diverse students that they matter in this world.

While a diverse curriculum reflects minorities, it shows white students the white privilege they may not see. One of the most important conversations during my interviews with Whaley pertained to the effects of a diverse curriculum on white students. Whaley mentioned that his world changed when he read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. After reading the story he felt obligated to insert this poetic novel into his curriculum. The effects were life-changing for both him and his students,

“Almost wholesome kids were like I’ve never thought about this stuff before. Why would they? There is no reason for 99% of bubble Fairfield kids too. It’s no fault of their own.

They don't have teachers explaining to them that there is a world outside and they certainly don't have parents explaining to them that there is a world outside.” (Whaley)

He continued to mention that for the many students, this was the first time they had to confront racism and understand their white privilege. This impact of literature is exactly the inclusion of diverse authors is essential to all curriculum, regardless of the schools' demographic. Teaching diversity simultaneously informs students about their white privilege. After all, white privilege is

a key factor in racism. Through curriculum, white students can see and acknowledge racism in literature, society, and themselves. A lesson on diversity also teaches about whiteness “White students need ethnic studies if they are to come to the table and engage in meaningful conversation about the world in which they live” (Bebou 164). When students understand their whiteness and white privilege, they can see the truth; the world is more than a white void.

In order to cure the virus of racism within our country, the inclusion of diverse texts as well as the deconstruction of whiteness must be prioritized in the high school English curriculum. The colonized Canon needs to be thrown out the window. In its place, a new set of racially diverse texts must be etched into the high school curriculum. This rejuvenation will enact a new era of equality within our nation. Students will become productive members of society who embrace the values of democracy and diversity. More importantly, they will develop capabilities that enable them to live by and promote the realization of truth. Racially diverse literature must touch the lives of every high school student to create a nation with liberty and justice for all. There is only one way to wake the Dreamers out of their paralysis, that is with the alarm of racially diverse high school literature.

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