Abstract: This paper proposes three specific strategies for teaching an African American literature survey course. The author recommends that instructors 1) focus on the connection between literature and history; 2) trace the development of African American literary theory by emphasizing and highlighting the goals and agendas of African American writers; and 3) provide multiple opportunities and venues for reflecting on texts. Specific avenues for reflection include recording entries in commonplace books and utilizing technological forums to stimulate critical thinking and public discourse. These strategies assist students to not only effectively gain more knowledge and exposure to African American texts and authors, but also help students to examine their own beliefs about race and the past and present racial climate here in America. Several student responses are included as examples.

One of the courses I enjoy teaching most is African American literature. Subtitling the course "Narratives of Hope and Perseverance," I teach it as a survey course and begin with slave narratives and end with novels and short stories written in the latter 20th century. While there is much content to cover, I attempt to establish a pace that allows for coverage but prevents students from "drowning" in new material. I always assign Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of a Slave* and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents of a Slave Girl*. When we enter the Reconstruction era, we spend a good amount of time debating the opposing philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. This time period also allows students to examine the phenomenon of passing and the renouncement of one's racial self as presented in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; we compare this renouncement with the recovery of one's racial identity and past as portrayed in Charles Chestnut's "The Wife of His Youth." An entire class period is devoted to Paul Laurence Dunbar, the brilliant poet; his poems in dialect provide excellent preparation for the folklore of Zora Neale Hurston, whose novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as an anchor for Harlem Renaissance texts. As we enter the social protest movement of the 1940s and 50s, we tremble at the realism of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" and cringe at the stark use of
metaphor in Richard Wright's *Black Boy.* Focusing for a moment primarily on poetry allows us to experience the rage and passion of the Black Aesthetic Movement. Finally we end the course with a novel by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker's provocative essay "In Search of our Mother's Gardens," and short stories by authors such as Ernest Gaines and Jamaica Kincaid.

When students enter this class, they usually have little or no familiarity with African American texts or authors. By the end of the semester, however, most students are quite knowledgeable not only about classic texts, but also well-schooled in the history undergirding African American literature and the conversations and ideologies articulated by African American authors. I have discovered that the following approaches seem to engage and motivate students and make reading and learning more productive: (1) focusing on the connection between literature and history; (2) tracing the development of African American literary theory by emphasizing and highlighting the goals and agendas of African American writers; and (3) providing multiple opportunities and venues for reflecting on texts. These strategies assist students to not only learn about African American literature: they help students to examine their own beliefs about race and the past and present racial climate here in America. This paper will discuss these approaches individually and highlight selected student responses generated in a class of twenty students which included fourteen African American students, four white students, one Asian American student, and one exchange student from Germany.

When I teach any literature course, I always repeat this familiar adage: "literature reflects life." While this may sound a bit trite, it is particularly true with African American literature. Many of these authors highlight and narrate significant events in history in his or her storytelling and reference or recount various periods in American history that were particularly difficult and even traumatic for African Americans. As a result, to read African American literature systematically is to receive a crash course in American history with one important exception: now the historical tidbits and seemingly meaningless facts students received in high school or college are transformed into real and tangible events. These events are often gruesome, disturbing, and disheartening. It's one thing to lecture about the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; it's quite another to read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and read how Harriet Jacob's escape was followed by years of literally running from one
northern city to another to avoid being captured by her former master. It's one thing for a history teacher to reference the Great Migration; it's quite another for students to read a short story such as "The City of Refuge" by Rudolph Fisher which fleshes out, through characterization and conflict, why so many African Americans left the South at the early part of the 20th century and what they encountered when they arrived in the North. Again, it's commendable to teach students about the civil rights movement of the 1960s. But it's much more powerful to ask students to read portions of Malcolm X's writings or assign as readings the explosive and often controversial poetry written during the Black Aesthetic Movement. To teach African American literature is to simultaneously teach African American history and culture.

One rather important example of the kind of historical knowledge students gain is connected with the misconceptions many white students have regarding historically black colleges and universities. Before taking the course, these students had no idea why black colleges even existed. But after reading narratives referencing laws that punished any person who attempted to teach a slave to read and texts that described the South's commitment to segregation, students began to understand the necessity of Howard University in Washington D.C., Morehouse College in Atlanta, or South Carolina State University.

Thus, consistent references to American history and politics are part of the course content. We studied the 1705 1/8th black rule, the formation of the Freedman's Bureau, the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, Plessy vs. Ferguson, and the political losses after Reconstruction, and the founding of the NAACP. Certainly exposure to these historical organizations, laws, and events are necessary to understanding the literature of the African American as he traveled out of slavery into immersion with mainstream America. Many African American writers reference these events in their poetry, fiction, and novels.

Such historical connections are necessary since many students are not given the opportunity to read quality African American literature extensively. Even in the deep South, students are simply not familiar with "classic" African American texts. It's not surprising. While many high school anthologies currently include healthy portions of multicultural literature, it is the decision of the individual English teacher to select these texts. Additionally, many school districts are now prescribing a set curriculum of literary works in
an effort to prepare students to meet formidable high school standardized tests and/or high stakes college entrance exams. As a result, students often are not given the opportunity to study a healthy portion of African American texts. *The Awakening* may be selected over *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or *A Doll’s House* over *A Raisin in the Sun*. Teaching African American literature is also important today since many bookstores are marketing African American literature sections in their stores; these shelves, however, are stocked with books that are in essence "commercial" fiction. They contain contemporary love stories with predictable endings. Offering the classics is important in helping students understand the significant role African Americans have played in forming America's literary heritage.

Studying the historical context of the literature is an important and productive pedagogical strategy. Yet a second approach that has proved helpful is to trace the development of African American literary theory by examining the goals and agendas of African American writers. Students are assigned readings that reveal what early writers felt about their contribution to American literature. For example, we examined James Weldon Johnson, one of the original spokespersons for the African American literary movement who established a sense of urgency for African American writers to write and publish. He argues emphatically in his *Book of American Negro Poetry* that

> A people may be great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (883)

Johnson's statement permits students to sense just how high the stakes were for African American writers. Exposure to the essays of additional writers such as Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes unveil the conflict within this growing body of writers regarding exactly what forms constituted "great" literature. Many early African American writers felt drawn to Western art forms; these same writers attempted to prescribe topics
and force European forms of art and literature upon budding African American artists but were met with great resistance. Students in an African American literature courses benefit from reading and discussing the tensions and divisions emerging in the African American literary community.

One of the most obvious manifestation of tension emerged expressions of "blackness." The use of vernacular and dialect was, of course, one important avenue of this expression. James Weldon Johnson in particular was adamant in insisting that the use of the vernacular of the masses was "limited" and perpetuated an image that vanguard African American writers wanted to eliminate; as a result, Johnson discouraged the use of dialect in poetry and prose (902). Pressure did not always come from inside the ranks, however. Generous white patrons sympathetic to the arts, also urged many writers to minimize their "blackness" and embrace a cultural assimilation.

These emerging ideologies and historical tensions render class time an opportunity for lively discussion. Students are surprised to read about these tensions. They are amazed to discover that Zora Neale Hurston was criticized for her heavy use of dialect as well as for what many considered "stereotypical" characters. And they are pleased to learn that younger writers resisted the mandate to conform. One of these young authors, Langston Hughes, addressed this coercion towards assimilation in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In the introduction, Hughes scolds the artist who says "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet" and laments "the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness...to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (27). A few decades later, the danger is not cultural assimilation but didactic texts. Richard Wright cautions writers concerned with issues of social justice to resist using their art to confront racism. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing" he argues that "Negro writers should seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals. But if their writing is demanded to perform the social office of other professions, then the autonomy of craft is lost and writing detrimentally fused with other interests" (52). Students are able to see African American writers as human beings with opinions and agendas that were often subjugated to an unspoken (and sometimes spoken) obligation to insure that their writing always assist and improve the social and economic lot of the race.
Finally it is important that students are provided with means to reflect on the texts they are reading. While course assignments for this survey course include a midterm exam, a research paper and a collaborative group project, the two assignments that I believe are most important are the recording of reactions to readings in a commonplace book and responding to questions via a class forum on the University's learning management system. In his book of reflections published in 2011, critic Arthur Krystal describes commonplace books as books "cobbled together by literate people" among them John Milton, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson; Krystal claims that these books "served as repositories for whatever someone thought fit to record: medical recipes, jokes, verse, prayers, mathematical tables, aphorisms, and especially passages from letters, poems, or book" (50).

Commonplace books as an ancient method of journaling, however, arrived much earlier than the 17th century. Centuries ago these books provided fodder for writing arguments and other texts; Ann Moss writes that Erasmus in his famous text De copia of 1512, "set the mold for making commonplace books, in a passage advising how to store collections of illustrative examples in retrievable form. One should make oneself a notebook divided by place-headings, then subdivided into sections" (121). This is exactly what I ask my students to do: buy a notebook, select a notable passage, label their entries, and analyze and critique the passage selected.

But why ask students to journal? Introductory texts in an African American literature class can be quite graphic and disturbing. African American literature provides historical, fictional, and personal accounts of great loss and incredible cruelty, and reading these accounts can be troubling. A commonplace book provides a space for students to process and digest these testimonies and experiences. The somewhat prescriptive format eliminates the tendency to simply scribble random thoughts; students are required to select a passage from a text, jot the passage down and then explain why the passage is significant. Then students may write whatever they wish.

After reading The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, a text that dramatically critiques grouping and categorizing people according to race, one student reflected on the definition of race in her commonplace book. Pondering what she believes about race and her own existence in the African American community, she writes, "I'm not even sure if you
really can ignore a part of you that is as important as your race. . . your race does not define who and what you are, but I feel that it does have an impact on those things." While our society tends to push toward a collective color blindness, a push that seems reasonable as we now recognize and celebrate diversity, ignoring one's race is not an option. Questions about race are often ignited after reading portions of *The Souls of Black Folks* where W.E.B. DuBois masterfully articulates the dilemma of the Negro with no true self-consciousness, who "only sees himself through the eyes of others" (694). In DuBois' day, the notion of colorblindness was simply that--a notion; the law of the land ensured that skin color gained or denied a person access to the smallest of privileges. Another student, after reading about double consciousness in DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, made these connections to the present. She writes:

> The African American race still struggles with double-consciousness today. From my interpretation, DuBois suggests that the gift of being the seventh son curses us to an extent, because we allow what we see to hinder us from being who we are supposed to be. ..For some this "seventh sense" makes us feel inferior to our white counterparts or even makes us feel guilty for not being like our black counterparts.

As illustrated above, far from strolls down memory lane, students consistently demonstrate that the commonplace book provided a safe place to discuss their own feelings about race, particularly their own race and its impact on their lives in America.

While commonplace books are a productive medium for personal reflection, forum postings provide opportunities for personal reflection and public discourse, and also facilitate meaningful discussion and promote higher order thinking. The forum feature has been around so long that it can actually be considered "old school," particularly in terms of the arrival of wikis and blogs. Forum features nonetheless accommodate present day students who are comfortable with and often quite adept with technology. Julie Hofmann, who has documented her own experiences teaching on-line history courses, believes that utilizing blackboard and blogs benefits students in a variety of ways. She claims that these kinds of instructional strategies appeal to quiet students and provide students with "a place
to refine or reconsider their ideas and arguments and to continue conversations that ended with the close of class" (81). Hofmann also provides suggestions for designing such assignments: "Students respond much better and appear to get more out of on-line discussions when guidelines for assignments and their assessment are clear and assignments are built around open ended questions," claiming that these assignments can "empower students and help them realize their own potential as writers and researchers" (81).

In my African American literature class, the forum assignment requires students to respond to four questions always linked and grounded upon a classic African American text. These questions require students to not simply demonstrate that they had read the text, but require students to consider the complex moral and philosophical contexts posed by the writers and then state their position regarding a certain ideology or concept. When I explain the assignment, students are encouraged to debate these opposing viewpoints on the class message board, but reminded to always keep before them the historical racial thermometer of the U.S: depending on the time period, the historical context might reference the inability to vote, segregation in schools, churches, and public places, and up until the 1950s, rampant lynching. The four questions are listed below:

**Forum Question #1. Booker T. Washington vs. W.E. B. Dubois.**

Examine the two very different philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E. Dubois. Many have denounced BTW as an Uncle Tom and criticized his conciliatory attitude toward race relations. More recently, however, he has won the sympathy of historians for advocating a much less risky way of living during a very dangerous era. What do you think? Was he wrong? Or do you think that Dubois' philosophy was both preferable and reasonable?

**Forum Question #2. To pass or not to pass, that is the question.**

inherently wrong? Should a person be condemned for making this decision? Explain your answer. Be sure to reference the text(s).

Zora Neale Hurston comments directly and indirectly on colorism in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Examine Janie’s response when she learns that she is African-American. Read carefully her interactions with Mrs. Turner. What is Hurston saying about prejudice in the African-American community? Do you see these same prejudices demonstrated today?

Forum Question #4. What does race have to do with it?
Read Langston Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Langston Hughes is agitated when a certain poet declares that he wants to be a poet—not a Negro poet. What do you think? Is it wrong to see oneself as a writer who writes without regard for race? Should an African American writer acknowledge his or her racial identity in their works? Next comment on Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Should an African American writer feel compelled to address issues of social injustice in his or her work? Refer to the essay as you respond.

As the forum postings arrived over the semester, I found that student responses were thoughtful, honest, and frank. The student responses that follow were lifted from these message boards. Each posting is the voice of a different student. I offer first one student's response titled "Booker T. Washington vs. WEB Dubois: Reasonable vs. Preferable":

When I think about the great efforts of Mr. Booker T. Washington . . . I do not necessarily consider him to have been an Uncle Tom, which many have labeled him as. More importantly, I see him for what he was- one of the most notable figures in our nation, and a true spokesman for the African American people. I believe we should consider the efforts of Booker T. Washington just as we consider the work of Phillis Wheatley. I cannot personally judge Washington by today's standards, but by the standards of his own day. I don't consider this approach to be preferable, however, it is reasonable since it was
less risky and lessened his chances of getting killed. . . I prefer the philosophy of Dubois because I believe elevation is key, and education aids in elevation when the mind is able to truly be set free.

After the Washington/Dubois debate, students were asked to comment on the subject of passing for white. I found it interesting that every African American student "voted" against passing while students who were not African American were more sympathetic: if someone has an opportunity to improve their economic and social status, why not take it? The following posting on the moral dilemma of passing for white is titled "Passing" is Failing:

Before taking this class I had heard of the word "passing" but it had never been something that I had really thought about because honestly it's hard for my mind to even understand sometimes. It's almost like me completely renouncing my mother's side or my father's side of the family and pretending to have no relations to them. A huge sense of who I am is so deeply connected to the people that I come from. To deny being in connection with these people for the sake of social acceptance is something that I could never do....

This is why it's hard for me to understand why an individual could "pass." I understand that conditions during Reconstruction made it less than convenient to be black and especially to be biracial but we cannot give up who we are just because it's convenient. . . In my opinion "passing" is inherently failing. To deny some of who you are takes away your identity as an individual, no matter how easy it makes life for you at the moment.

Another student used language much more forceful in her condemnation of the act of passing. She explains her rationale in her response which she titled "That's a punk move":

I disagree with passing as much I did before reading "The Wife of His Youth" and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, if not now more than ever. Passing is a cowardly attempt at an "easier" life with too great a cost. I mean was passing really worth one's dignity? I feel that a person should be condemned for making the decision to pass. There is nothing respectable about a coward, a liar, and one who is willing to reject their own ancestry (literally a part of themselves) in order to live a lie. I understand that life as an African-American during the time period of these stories was not exactly easy but why be a coward and punk out to pass for White just because you have a good chance of getting away with it?

While the first two questions evoked much discussion, feelings were most animated by a discussion of colorism, discrimination based on skin color. After students read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I introduced students to the term which Alice Walker penned in 1982 and elaborates on in great detail in an essay titled "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" I include her definition here:

What black women should be interested in, I think, is a consciously heightened awareness on the part of light black women that they are capable, often quite unconsciously, of inflicting pain upon them; and that unless the question of Colorism—in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color—is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black "sisterhoods" we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us. (290-291)

After reading and discussing Walker's terminology, I asked students to weigh in on the concept of colorism in the African American community. One student titled her response "The Act of Colorism Defeats the Purpose of Our Struggle!" and then explains her position:
Hurston is trying to show that prejudices within the black community are ironic, because they shouldn't even exist in the first place. Colorism basically takes place when people begin to discriminate within their own ethnic groups. In actuality, I never really quite understood such discrimination amongst one's own people, especially within the black community. I see these prejudices within the black community even today with products such as skin tone creams and bleaches on store shelves. Even in the music we listen to and the music videos we watch, the light skin model (better known as the red bone) is casted first, and the darker model is merely a standby or back-up chick. It's really sad how we have programmed ourselves to think this way. I believe it is a direct result of us starting to actually treat ourselves the way we were once treated by whites. More specifically, within the black community colorism only defeats the purpose of our struggle. This struggle is essentially the fight we have been fighting since our emancipation from slavery. . . . At the end of the day, we are all still black, and we must realize that we cannot unite our race by dividing it.

Finally, when reading Langston’s Hughes admonitions in his landmark essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," and Richard Wright's views as expressed in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," students are forced to think critically about who might be correct. Is it wrong to simply want to be a poet, and not a poet who willfully associates with a certain race? Or, as Wright ponders, should a writer subordinate and sacrifice his craft and solely focus on social injustices? Is the plight or progress of a race more weighty and focal than attention to form or more important than a beautifully crafted metaphor or allusion? These questions move students beyond a knowledge of who wrote what or which symbols emerge in a text. It is important that we enable students to link literature with history, including the history of how these pioneering African American writers articulated the rightful relationship between race and creativity. It was interesting to discover that many students disagreed with Langston Hughes' criticism. In a posting titled "Go Tell it on the Colored Mountain," one student describes what she believes to be a misunderstanding on Langston Hughes' part:
I think the first step to trying to defeat racism is breaking down the color barriers we have between people. What difference would it make if a poet was black or white but was a great poet nonetheless? I don't understand why a color must be associated with someone if they do something well. It almost seems as if African Americans are few and far between when it comes to them being great at something and the saying "...and he's/she's BLACK, too!" must be pinned at the end of their accomplishment. I understand where Langston Hughes is coming from when he feels the need to showcase pride in being an African American but I side more with what the young man's thoughts were about being known as just a poet.

Another student agreed in a posting titled "A Mountain of Lies and Assumptions":

I think this was all an assumption taking the man's words out of context. As Langston Hughes stated, "the young Negro [poet] said to me once, 'I want to be poet- not a Negro poet"... "Believe" is the key word suggesting to the audience that Langston Hughes, a Negro poet himself, took offense when it wasn't necessary. I see nothing wrong with writing without regard for race. It is not the skin color of the one who writes, but the words that one writes. At the end of the day, when I read a poem, I do not remember whether or not the poet was black or white, but instead, the meaning I took from the work of art and how I related it to my own life.

This writer then continued to express her opinion regarding Richard Wright and his fear of restrictions on creative material:

With that being said, an African American writer can and should not be compelled to address issues of social injustice in his or her work. No one should be forced to write on such topics if they do not want to. When people write just to please others, the work usually doesn't have any emotional appeal to its audience because it is forced from the writer's fingertips instead
of his/her heart. Again, just because a writer is African American, he/she does NOT have to write about social injustices that have taken place, or taking place, or will take place. It's up to the writer as to whether or not he/she would like to address the issues, but as Langston Hughes stated, although "an artist must be free to choose what he does, he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose."

As these postings illustrate, today's college students are modern students with their own opinions and beliefs forged by their own experiences. Providing opportunities to read classic African American texts and then critically examine how these texts intersect with their own experiences contributes to a broader view of the world and the people around them. This is demonstrated by their almost unanimous dissension with Langston Hughes, a disagreement which confirms much of what Toure discusses in his recent book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* In a discussion of the black artist, he quotes Michael Eric Dyson, professor of sociology at Georgetown University who says "The first obligation of art is to represent the truth as the individual sees it...Whereas in Black communities the artist has often been burdened with what James Baldwin called the 'obligation of representation.' But now part of what it means to be Black is I can be true to what I believe" (qtd. on page 29). Aside from the mandate to critically read these texts, this is what students long to do: read an essay and be granted the freedom to agree or disagree with its premises.

Teaching African American literature using these approaches has been productive for me as well as my students. It's an exciting course to teach, not just because I am an African American or because I identify with the African American experience. Teaching African American literature is exciting because it brings the past to life. In addition, course readings and discussions facilitate an environment and climate where students can examine themselves and their own beliefs about race. Lisa Guerrero, who teaches comparative ethnic studies, writes that "Race is personal in a way that poetry and physics can never be because race is *lived*, even as it is ignored, denied, vilified, and/or hidden behind" (7). African American literature allows students to see what and who is being ignored, or vilified, or hidden. It truly empowers an invaluable type of "sight." And in the
process, students are enabled to see African American Literature as a means to celebrate a rich legacy of American literature that belongs to all of us.


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