

Section A

To the Members of the Portfolio Committee,

During my first year at Spelman, my writing has significantly improved. While my highschool essays usually centered on literature, this year I have been tasked to write more on nonfiction. Whether it is analyzing texts on identity from Beverly Daniel-Tatum or exploring reading literacy with N. Katherine Hayles, I have begun to broaden the content I read and understanding of different subjects. This year, I also joined the Spelman College BluePrint newspaper and the Odyssey Online. From these publications I have gained experience using AP Style, learning how to write without bias, fact checking, and explaining multiple sides of an issues.

For Section B, I chose to submit my African Diaspora and the World (ADW) critical essay from first semester. I chose this essay because it tied in the skills I'd learned from Honors Composition, theories from my ADW class, and discussions from my Black Women in Television colloquia.

For Section C, I chose my final Honors Composition research paper. For this paper, we created our own question centered on the topic of reading literacy. This was the most challenging paper to write because I created my own rules. I created my own research question and chose the sources to use, which proved to be both a daunting and rewarding task. I am proud that I addressed the topic of the lack of diversity in literature, an issue that has concerned me since middle school, and was able to provide valid sources to a problem I felt few had recognized.

The Section C essay engaged me the most as a writer because of the hours of time spent on research. In a month I became an expert on multicultural literature

and the effects on students. The hours of perusing through databases and documents helped refine my research skills and taught me how to successfully skim a document to find whether it is valuable to my work. Creating my own research topic also helped with my creativity in addressing questions from a different angle.

For both essays, I would like the writing committee to take note that my voice and ideas were dominant. I was able to control the sources and use them to my advantage, instead of catering the essay to the ideas of others. In each essay, I feel as though I approached the topics from a unique angle and linked multiple disciplines within the body of work to include a range of perspectives.

Both essays required the use of outside research and sources. Through these papers, I have come to realize that research and learning about a topic requires just as much time as putting thoughts to paper. I am proud that with both prompts, I took questions that initially did not interest me and catered them towards my own interests.

For Section D, the second prompt regarding the hashtag #growingupblack caught my attention the most. While most discussions surrounding Twitter have centered on activism, I was interested to find equal significance of the more comical side of Twitter. Composing this essay was no different than in my other classes. Most of my professors have given us free reign with writing and rarely have limitations, so I did not struggle composing an essay outside of class.

While tackling the Section D prompt, I applied my skills of research from my previous Honors Composition class to better gain insight on the topic. Keeping in mind what deems a source as credible, checking author credentials, and using

different disciplines all contributed to the formation of my opinion on the topic of Black Twitter and hashtags.

From working on this essay, I learned as a writer how to separate my journalistic style from my academic style. Initially when approaching the topic, I realized I was solely focused on stating facts and opposing opinions without investing my own ideas into the work. After a revision, I began scale back on the sources and put more of my own ideas into the paper.

My strengths as a writer come from my ability to self-edit. I usually rewrite entire papers, add new paragraphs, and take out ideas before seeing the final product. This process has allowed me to allow every sentence to be impactful.

During my first year at Spelman, I have realized that one of my weaknesses is flow. While I often have multiple ideas running through my head, I realize that the ideas don't always seem to connect on paper. I discovered my weakness through peer edits, when I realized I had to explain much of my paper in order for my peers to understand how ideas connected. By going to the writing center and having at least two other people read my writing before submission, I plan to improve how I connect ideas. I have also begun to use transition paragraphs to emphasize ideas, rather than sticking with the traditional five body paragraph essay. However, I understand there is more room to grow. I would like to thank the writing committee for taking the time to review my portfolio. While I have acknowledged my weaknesses, I appreciate the input of others to further advance my writing.

The ADW readings this semester convey a great deal about the complexity of identity. Discuss how that complexity is revealed in either Joanne Hyppolite’s “Dyaspora,” Beverly Daniel-Tatum’s “Who am I?” or Audre Lorde’s essays. Construct a critical essay that features a strong and clear thesis statement and a discussion that backs up that thesis statement with clear and well organized evidence. The discussion should incorporate at least two or three ADW concepts (e.g., knowledge construction, race, gender, intersectionality, etc.), and do so in a way that demonstrates comprehension of those concepts. The discussion should also demonstrate meaningful engagement with relevant ADW sources (at least three, other than the one above featured in your paper).

The Mammy and Jezebel: Constructed Identities of Women of the Diaspora

Gone with the Wind has been repeatedly analyzed by critics to glorify the Confederate south, present nostalgia for slavery, and enforce the Mammy stereotype. Despite this, the film is the highest grossing in America and ranked the sixth best movie by the American Film Institute. *Gone with the Wind* is not the first or last film to mimic people of the diaspora. The messages in movies, television, and music create global images based on stereotypes that send subliminal messages on how a specific gender, race, or sexual orientation behaves. In her essay “Complexity of Identity: Who Am I?,” Beverly Daniel Tatum explains that our identity is reflected back to us through the “looking glass self,” or factors of our environment (105). Iconic images, like those from *Gone with the Wind*, can leave a stigma and perception seventy-five years later. At the same time, lyrics from popular music can feed derogatory lyrics into the subconscious. Mass media plays a significant role in molding the “looking glass” for black women in the United States, creating a national identity to accommodate the dominant majority. However, media does not reflect the reality of black women, but instead is based on stereotypes that shape and define the United State’s ideas of race and gender.

The Jezebel is a term that rose during slavery in the United States to describe sexually promiscuous slaves. The term Jezebel made black women the temptress, creating the myth that black women could not be raped because the Jezebel always desired sex, justifying the abuse of

slave masters (West 244). Angela Davis notes in her essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” that while black women were deprived of femininity in the slave system, their basic anatomy was abused to place them in subordinate status in gender and race (153). This fictitious narrative of the Jezebel has left an impression of black women today. The dominant majority was able to reconstruct the facts of history to suit their purposes, leaving the rape of the enslaved out of history books while pushing exploited images of the black women’s body to mass media. In Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s essay “Gender as an Analytic Category,” she notes “social control of female sexuality has contributed to gender hierarchies” (103). The lack of choice and perceived sexuality of black women is an example of social control over sexual identity. Though some women own their sexuality to rebel against the exploitation of their bodies by the media, this small exception does not change the overall perception. From derogatory music videos using the black woman’s butt as a prop, to the constant casting of black women as mistresses, the media confirms the stereotyped image of sexually promiscuous black women as the norm.

While the Jezebel is overly sexualized, the Mammy is the opposite. Big, dark skinned, and sexless the Mammy is there to serve the needs of everyone but herself. The Mammy cares for children, loyally meets the needs of her master, and keeps her male contemporaries in check. While historians created the Jezebel to erase the sexual abuse of slaves, the Mammy erases the inhumane qualities of slavery by creating a maternal figure who finds comfort serving others (West 230). Though slavery was a system that tore families apart, the matriarchal Mammy implies that family units were the norm and denies the experiences of women who became mothers through rape (Davis 140, 141). Rebellious black women poisoning masters, ending pregnancies, and starting marooned communities is evidence to the lack of contentment black

women had for slavery (Gomez 119, 122, 128). However, the media does not portray these images. Instead, the Mammy has remained a constant symbol of nostalgia for slavery in the “Old South.” The Mammy is seen as a mothering figure, drawn cartoonish with exaggerated features that portray her as undesirable. She directly contrasts with the overly feminine white housewife, who has lighter skin and straight hair. Through these images, the dominant majority has also established beauty standards to praise features opposite to the Mammy.

The Jezebel and Mammy not only negatively impact the perception of women in the United States; but also can also affect identity formation. Tatum credits that our identity is often a reflection of historical, political, and social contexts (105). Essentially, we see ourselves as the world has defined us. When young black girls look to the media, they will only see themselves painted in a negative light. Some will reflect the traits of the Jezebel and Mammy – assuming the constant images must constitute reality, believing that their role is either as a sexual being or caring mother. Tatum notes how rebellious figures are rarely recognized in history because the dominant majority does not find interest in narratives that contrast their perceived reality (111). Thus, the subordinate group is left with single story to define their past and future.

The visibility of black women in the media is limited in the United States. Often, their story is stuck between the narrative of a white woman or black man. Intersectionality, the idea that identity has various layers that determine how you move through the world, can affect your experiences (Tatum 106). The experiences of black women cannot be accurately represented through white women, who experience gender differently due to their race. On the same note, women experience race differently than men. Tatum notes how the subordinate group is informed on the dominant, but the latter is not (111). Intersectionality is not incorporated in mass marketed television shows and movies, so the dominant majority is not exposed to the

experiences of black women. In Guy-Sheftall's essay "Gender as an Analytic Category," she credits the media as a major gender shaping institution (102). To those who have never interacted with a black woman, these images are the only lens into the perspective of black woman. For example, Keith Wyche highlights in his book *Good is Not Enough* that while white men interact with black men through sports and have grown up with white women, few come in contact with black women (30). Thus the dominant majority rely on the media to portray who the black woman is. The dominant majority is more likely to accept these images because they have no friends or family to counter the messages on screen. This can make visibility for black women nearly impossible, and the Jezebel and Mammy become recycled stereotypes that construct a new reality.

Between Viola Davis winning an Emmy for her work on *How to Get Away with Murder* and the recent influx of black women starring on prime time shows in the United States, there has been increased representation on the screen. Despite this progress, most of the prime time actresses play mistresses. In the grocery aisles, Aunt Jemima continues to be a reminder of the Mammy. The dominant majority controls the media, using images from constructed history to create new realities that are integral to not only shaping the mindset of the United States, but black women as well. The stereotypes of media change how populations in and outside of the United States perceive black women.

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What is the relationship between the lack of young adult multicultural literature read in the classroom and the cognitive engagement of teenagers of color in the classroom?

Representation Matters: The Need for Young Adult Multicultural Literature in the
Classroom

Last summer, the “We Need Diversity in Books” social media campaign exploded on the Internet, with people holding signs calling for more representation in books. Testimonies came from a wide range of people, as each told how books shaped their perspective of themselves and their view of society. A young teen wrote, “We need diversity in books because I’m black, queer, and fat...and I want to be the hero and ride a dragon too.” An Asian teen recalls how the images in her books led her to draw “self portraits of blonde blue eyed girls. That was the only way I could understand myself as beautiful.” The campaign highlighted the monolithic theme of published books and the images that we present to students in the classroom. The types of books students read can negatively affect their identity development as well as engagement in the classroom. By adding young adult multicultural literature to classrooms, engagement will increase with students of color as we incorporate a broader perspective of the world into classrooms.

While it is important to encourage students to read books from the past, these books limit discussions on issues students face in their communities today. Introducing young adult literature into the classroom is one way to engage students, who will gain perspective on issues like racism and prejudice from the eyes of a relatable character. However, in order for engagement to truly connect to young adults of color, strictly looking to mainstream books will not be the answer.

Due to the lack of diversity in publishing companies, a lot of popular young adult fiction focuses on white heroes. Mary Couzelis highlights the whitewashed world of the popular dystopian fiction genre in her essay “The Future Is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels.” While scholars and critics argue that dystopian fiction can teach readers to recognize the wrongdoings of our current society, the dystopian world often portrays a future where race is eliminated. Popular novels like *The Giver*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Uglies* critique the past for problems of war and oppression, but fail to recognize the problems of modern day racism. The issues of the past are solved with sameness of race in the future, which often leads to a lack of characters of color (Couzelis). This source challenges other articles that claim introducing young adult fiction in the classroom can lead to engagement. While students of color may relate to the main characters, many will not feel an urge to read about a future they are not apart of.

The key to engagement is using not only young adult fiction, but adjusting the classroom to incorporate characters of color as well. The United States has made little progress in adapting the format of the classroom to suit the needs of all students. Steven Wolk, a Northeastern Illinois professor of teacher education, surveyed a group of twenty-two students from nineteen different high schools and discovered that the books students read in 2010, correlated with the books students read in Arthur Applebee’s survey in 1988. The lack of diversity in popular titles like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Shakespeare’s plays shows the lack of progress the public education system has made with the shifting demographics of the country (Wolk 12). The goal of education is to shape individuals to contribute positively to society and approach problems from various perspectives. However, if students have been reading the same books for the past twenty years, what new knowledge are we really instilling? Students are reading books from individuals of the same background and can “see more diversity watching baseball on TV

than they do in their school reading” (Wolk 12). The books we choose to use in classrooms also send a subliminal message on whose work is valued and whose is not. Students of color may infer that only white authors are deemed credible enough to discuss in school.

My research places an emphasis on young adult fiction, because most genres are limited to historical events for people of color (Hughes Hassell 214). Introducing a wider landscape of personalities, heroes, and adventures allow students to broaden their imagination and offers them the idea of limitless opportunities. Also, young adult fiction better connects with students than reading from the perspective of an adult. As author Sharon G. Flake points out, “Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we’ve got to give them books that remind them of home” (qtd. Hughes-Hassell 214). The messages, tone, and style between Toni Morrison and Flake can engage students in two different ways. For example, Morrison’s *Beloved* reflects the perspective of a woman recently escaped from slavery with a family of her own. This does not dismiss the relevancy of her work, but students may better engage with Flake’s character Makeela Madison in *The Skin I’m In*, who is bullied by her black peers for her dark skin and homemade clothing. Flake uses school, student and teacher relationships, and modern dialogue to communicate themes specifically catered towards young adults.

Introducing classrooms to young adult multicultural literature will be the answer to engaging students and creating an environment prone to critical thinking about race relations, different cultures, and politics. Multicultural literature also affords the opportunity for students to engage in a discussion on power structures and systems of privilege that race can afford. This works to affirm people of color’s experiences and recognizes the flaws in the dominant Eurocentric narrative (Baer and Glasgow 25). In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and growing concerns over police brutality, unfortunately the classroom has remained blind to

race. By discussing racism and systems of privilege in the classroom, minorities are able to sort through conflicting feelings and connect what they've learned in class to what's happening in the larger world. However, this will not be an easy task, as teachers hold their own biases and opinions. This form of discussion can be facilitated by discussing experiences of characters from multicultural literature. These types of conversations not only benefit students of color, but all students. Baer and Glasgow cite multicultural literature in the post 9/11 world as a way to bridge the gap between stereotypes of Muslims by reading about their experiences through the eyes of another teenager (23). Teacher can create a more engaging and creative learning experience by introducing the perspective of various people of color while connecting lessons from books to the real world.

Multicultural literature also helps students of color shape their identity. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum cites adolescence as a key period in defining oneself, particularly for young adults of color who are exploring their racial and ethnic identity as they combat the negative images society pushes on them (Hughes-Hassell 218). Students often look to mass media to define themselves, however the stereotypes in media present the idea that "one story the only story"(qtd. Hughes-Hassell 216). The lack of representation in the classroom complicates this process, resulting in students having nowhere to look for relatable characters. Multicultural literature serves to negate the single story, giving students of color a more holistic portrait of themselves. Introducing narrators that are coming to terms with their own racial, cultural, and ethnic identity serves as a source of positive representation that affirms students of color's experiences.

The main issue of incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom is the limited pool of books. Out of the 3,400 books that have been published between 1985 and 2011, only

300 centered on characters of color (Hughes-Hassell 213). The small amount of multicultural literature in the market points to underlying racism in the publishing industry, which lacks editors and agents of color. With such a small pool of works to choose from, teachers must carefully discern which books to use in their classrooms. The topics in young adult literature often change over time, which may cause students to feel disconnected with the story if the character's issues are not reflecting current reality. For example, the conditions and racism that Muslim Americans faced after the September 11 attacks is a different experience than before 2001.

James McBride, Zora Neal Hurston, Amy Tan, and Toni Morrison were the only four authors of color I was assigned in school. Even though this is a small number, compared to other schools it is more than average. Educator Nancy Larrick cautioned that if we hope to create more "humility" in the world, it will not be done through "gentle doses of racism in children's books" (Hughes-Hassell 212). Representation matters, not only to young adults of color but to society as a whole. By transforming the classroom into one that acknowledges various perspectives and cultures, we can begin to create global citizens with enhanced awareness of themselves and the broader world.

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