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Thoughts on African American Literature From the IMSA English Department

Michael Dean

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, mdean@imsa.edu

Michael W. Hancock

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, mhanc@imsa.edu

Leah Kind

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, lkind@imsa.edu

Adam Kotlarczyk

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, akotlarczyk@imsa.edu

Erin Micklo

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, emicklo@imsa.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Michael Dean, Michael W. Hancock, Leah Kind, Adam Kotlarczyk, Erin Micklo, and Tracy A. Townsend

Thoughts on African American Literature

From the IMSA English Department

Why do you consider it important to teach and read African American literature?

Historically, the literary canon has been dominated by the voices of white men and that perspective often neglects or misconstrues the important and longstanding legacy of African Americans. Not only does the inclusion of African American lit expand the depth of the literary canon, it reminds us that many issues that involve race are still prevalent today and that there are universal, human experiences that cross racial and cultural boundaries.

– Mr. Dean

To my mind the important thing about reading literature, period, regardless of who it was written by or from whence they came, is that reading shows you new worlds. Sometimes these are literally completely different worlds, and sometimes they're funhouse mirrors of our own, but they're different, and exposing ourselves to what's Not Ourselves both can and should make you think differently about your world and self. It's pretty simple. I read authors of color because I want to feel I'm part of a bigger world, one that feels more real for having been expanded.

– Ms. Townsend

Victorian novelist George Eliot famously stated, "If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, then it does nothing." She also wrote, "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot." As Eliot recognized, reading any literature allows us to imagine lives, times, and places other than our own and makes us more empathetic. African-American literature in particular speaks to individual and collective experiences of enduring and transcending racism, prejudice, poverty, and inequality that are not my own but which, through the imagination, belong to us all. It's part of my toolbox for living. – Dr. Hancock

It's important to teach and read African American literature for the same reason it's important to teach Jewish literature, Chinese American literature, Partition literature, classic literature, and so forth. If we deny the writings of one group of authors (however we are designating that group) we begin to privilege the intellectual and creative productions of one group over another, and in that, we lose. – Dr. Kind

It's important for students to read texts from a variety of cultures; they can not only learn about the way other people live, but they can see that many struggles that human beings face are universal. – Ms. Micklo

Literature, at its best, is often about taking risks - questioning and challenging institutions, systems, modes of thought. What I love about so much of African American literature is that it breaks rules and challenges systems and ways of thinking. In the case of early slave narratives like **Frederick Douglass** and **Harriet Jacobs**, the very act of writing itself was a fierce challenge to the status quo. In the 20th century, you have the famous writers from post-World War Two - **Richard Wright** and **Ralph Ellison**, to name two - but you also have these wonderful books by African American women - **Zora Neale Hurston**, and later **Alice Walker** and **Toni Morrison**, who wins the Nobel - challenging not just cultural ideas about African Americans, but about women, too.

– Dr. Kotlarczyk

Do you have a favorite piece of African American literature to teach?

What is it and why do you and your students enjoy it?

I love teaching *A Raisin in the Sun*. It's great because it's set in Chicago and is so real (as well as being very accessible). Hansberry's personal experience parallels the play, and her characters are fantastic. – Ms. Micklo

I've taught **Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"** in many different classes. The basic plot consists of a now "properly" educated daughter returning to her childhood home in the South where her mother and painfully shy younger sister still live. The older daughter absolutely pities them in their "rural" simplicity, and views her former life, heritage, and background as though she's a tourist in a museum. She starts snapping up items from the home--such as a butterchurn, worn smooth by constant use through generations of hands--that she values for their aesthetic, rather than practical, purposes. The breaking point comes when she chides her mother and sister for actually using beautiful old handmade quilts--she's horrified that they are in regular use, and finally the mother has had enough, and essentially tosses the eldest daughter and her pretensions from the house. I love this story for the way it presents a conflict of values within a family. Although an instructor can teach the story using only race and identity as a focusing point, I think it also can absolutely transcend race, and students of myriad backgrounds speak of the way that it impacts them because of how they can emphasize with the characters and the conflict. – Dr. Kind

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. This is a widely taught text about Douglass's experience as a slave and his eventual freedom. Its popularity is not surprising because Douglass is a powerful writer who not only describes the brutal realities of slavery, but also provides an intimate window into his inner thoughts and the gradual development of his own identity. I think students respond to Douglass's convictions and appreciate the details of his writing. He doesn't pull punches and that has a profound impact on the reader. – Mr. Dean

I really enjoy teaching **Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***. It's a beautiful book about finding your voice and your identity. It's not overtly political or didactic; it paints rich characters and crafts an intriguing story. It's one of those rare books that's as fun to read for class as it is to read on your own.

– Dr. Kotlarczyk

I've always loved **Lucille Clifton's poetry**, because it balances so well on the knife's edge of dialectal language and standard poetic discourse. She has a sound and sight that's distinctly her own (and race is, distinctly, part of that); calling attention to how attentively she uses language is an endless pleasure for me. – Ms. Townsend

The African-American work that has resonated most with my students is **Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***. Her play features unforgettable characters spanning three generations, living together in a tinderbox of an apartment in which dreams are a source of conflict and sustenance. In performing scenes from the play, students love taking on the roles of characters with whom they identify, from the larger-than-life matriarch Mama to her adult children and sibling rivals, Beneatha and Walter Lee. Hansberry's dialogue helps students to lose themselves in memorable language and find a part of themselves in others' words. They also enjoy the inspirational story of a dream realized in spite of family tragedy and personal adversity. – Dr. Hancock

What is your favorite text, of any genre, by an African American author?

I really enjoy **N.K. Jemisin's *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms***, which is a high fantasy novel that, unlike other high fantasy texts, which tend to replace human racial and ethnic groups with nonhuman species, revels in the vastness of its world to create languages, peoples, and politics of all colors. It features a mixed-race female protagonist from a matriarchal warrior kingdom whose people resemble (but are not) what we would consider African. Jemisin uses her own status as a writer of color to create believable races and peoples in a completely separate otherworld, and by doing it shows how the tensions of race and self-categorization aren't just "real world" concerns, but fundamentally human concepts reaching deep into myth and fantasy, too. – Ms. Townsend

I'm hooked on African-American and Creole cartoonist **George Herriman's *Krazy Kat***, an influential and critically acclaimed daily and Sunday newspaper comic from the 1910s to the 1940s that was named the #1 comic of the 20th century by the *Comics Journal*. Passing as white, the mixed-race Herriman blazed the path for comics as a medium of personal expression and explored both the verbal and visual dimensions of comics with various dialects and innovative layouts. The simple structure of the love triangle of Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and Offisa Pup generated decades of misunderstanding, brick-throwing antics, and humor. Their cat-and-mouse (-and-dog) game virtually invented funny animal comics as we know them. – Dr. Hancock

I love **Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***. It's difficult to read because it's emotional and the pain is very raw in the book, but it's an excellent book. Her use of language, and the way she weaves the lily-white *Dick and Jane* book series into the narrative is amazing. – Ms. Micklo

Do I have to choose just one? **Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*** is a really tightly written book. **WEB DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*** is a beautiful collection of essays and important, I think, to any understanding of the early 20th century in America. And of course **Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again."** And if we're going to look outside of the written page, you can't ignore what **Spike Lee** has done – his documentary ***Four Little Girls*** is one of the most powerful things I've ever seen. Lately I've been enjoying the work of **Z.Z. Packer**, who has a good little book of short stories called ***Drinking Coffee Elsewhere***, that came out in 2003. – Dr. Kotlarczyk

Mine's a bit obscure. ***The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano***. The text is a true account of a man, Equiano, who is kidnapped as a child from Africa and sold into slavery. He finds himself serving aboard a variety of ships, both British and American. He obtains an education, converts to Christianity, and eventually buys his freedom and settles in London. I find the book intriguing because despite the fact that Equiano identifies as a British citizen, this text is often found in American Lit courses due to its transatlantic themes and the

idea of the “self-made man.” This text was published in part for American audiences such as recently literate apprentices and tradesmen who were intrigued with Equiano’s adventures. The story features naval battles, strange events on the high seas, as well as prophetic dreams and religious experiences. It’s an amazing work. I also enjoy the writing of **Octavia Butler**. She wrote a short story called **“Blood Child,”** which features humanity on a far-off planet being used as egg hosts for giant worm-like aliens. Very creepy, but an interesting critique on gender and abuses of power. – Mr. Dean

Describe a time when reading an African American text had an impact on your life. How old were you? What did it make you consider/think about/realize?

When I was 14, a teacher made me read **Richard Wright's *Black Boy*** for class. There's a chapter when Wright, who's just a kid, wants to learn more about a writer he saw in the newspaper. He gets the idea to go to the library and check out books by this author. Only problem is, back then in the South, a black kid couldn't get a library card. So he has to figure out a way to get a library card - just so he can read! Now I loved reading as a kid - next to my baseball glove, my library card was probably the favorite thing I owned. And to read about how Richard Wright couldn't even get a library card, that he had to get help from a white man and even trick a librarian, just to get a book, that stuck with me. It helps me remember not to take anything for granted - even something as seemingly simple as a library card - and to remember that other people, though they've done nothing wrong, can have dramatically different experiences than I've had. - Dr. Kotlarczyk

***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs** caught me by surprise. I was studying for my Ph.D. exams and this was one of the texts that I included on my reading list. I had never read it previously. The book does an excellent job of highlighting the uniquely difficult position that African American women occupied during slavery, and it impressed upon me the idea that despite having studied a lot of literature, a new reading can still reveal new lessons about society. More importantly, this was a book that went unnoticed during its own time, but was rediscovered by contemporary critics. - Mr. Dean

Anything that my wonderful mixed-race teenage nephew Nate writes reminds me that African-American literature is not as far from home as it once seemed for me. - Dr. Hancock

My freshman year in college, I was in a class that spend a week -- a rock-solid week -- working with **Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool."** Students were challenged to read it in different voices, to translate it into photo-montage, to set it to music, to act it out as a blackout play, to take this slender set of twenty-four words and turn it into as many different expressions of art and emotion and despair and defiance we could muster. I've never worked with anything so closely, before or since. I don't think I'll ever forget hearing a student who lived in my dorm sing the poem a capella in the biggest, straight-from-the-risers-of-his-Baptist-church voice I had ever heard, or how it made me shiver. That was probably my first authentic realization of the power readers have to transform a text. - Ms. Townsend

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the most memorable books I read as an English major in college. I've read it multiple times, and get something new from it each time. - Ms. Micklo

When I was in junior high, we memorized (or attempted to memorize!) **Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning"** which she performed at President Clinton's first Inauguration. Angelou was only the second poet to read a poem at a Presidential Inauguration, (the first being Robert Frost) and was the first African-American, and first woman. As a junior high kid, I didn't realize the significance of this event, although I'm sure our teachers impressed it upon us, but what stuck with me was the poem, the first 10 lines or so I can still recite. As time has gone by and I've looked at the poem again with fresh eyes and listened again to Angelou's reading of it (which many critics called a "performance"--citing her theatrical background and experience as lending the true power to the work) I am always taken back to being a young student in a classroom, tasked with memorizing lines to a poem, and thinking about what those words meant, what those words combined to mean as lines, those lines as stanzas. As any student of literature, even those who adore poetry, will say, poetry is tough! Approaching it in this way, and seeing how moved people could be by the reading of a poem, left a lasting impact on me about the power of words, of thoughts, and of emotions. – Dr. Kind