

Becoming Daisy, Living Mildred: On Challenging Our Own Canonical Complicity

The authors reflect on their own past classroom text selections and practices to illustrate their unintentional complicity in upholding whiteness within their classrooms.

Oprah Winfrey once shared that Maya Angelou told her, “You did in your twenties what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better.” Knowing better and doing better, however, certainly doesn’t erase the shame people feel when they think back to personal beliefs and teaching practices they enacted before they knew or did better. We are talking from personal experience, as two teachers who loved and loved to teach books that now, with more critical frameworks of both literature analysis and pedagogical approaches, we remember with less fondness and more embarrassment.

Heidi, a white woman, loved teaching *The Great Gatsby* (see Figure 1), which she largely taught as a novel to explore the American dream and the ways that class and money determine which kind of American vision you are allowed to imagine or live. While Heidi waxed poetic over Fitzgerald’s prose, her students—mostly white in a suburban school in Utah—drew the ash heaps on the board. With her class, she discussed the symbolism of the green light and the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg, and questioned Nick’s reliability as a narrator. She talked about capitalism and consumption, dreaming and dying alone, and charted characters’ changes and turning points. It was the final unit of the year, and it felt to Heidi like a most joyful and poignant ending.

Stephanie (S. R.), a Black woman, is an avid reader of science fiction, so when she had the opportunity to teach *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

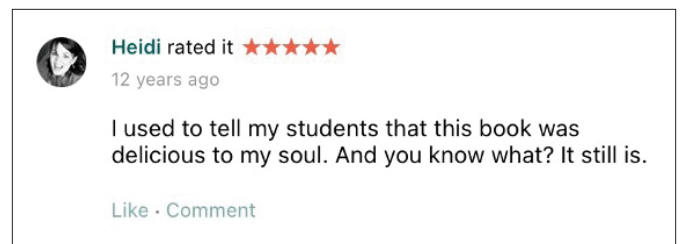


FIGURE 1
Heidi’s Goodreads review of *The Great Gatsby*

in a ninth-grade class in a racially and economically diverse high school in Florida, she jumped at the chance. She created lessons on censorship as a means of societal control, knowledge and individuality versus ignorance and conformity, and the often-destructive nature of technology. She reveled in classroom conversations as she guided students in a rigorous study of the text. She applauded students as they presented critiques on the place and role of technology in modern society, participated in discussions of censorship and how real-life book bans are mirrored in the novel, and engaged in debates on the role of knowledge and individuality in a democratic society. In those pedagogical moments, she felt like she had finally learned what it meant to be a good teacher of English because students were engaged in the lessons, connecting the text to the world around them, and truly analyzing the literature they were reading.

These novels are part of our personal literacy heritage (Muhammad 139). As teachers, we wanted

to share with our students the things we loved about these texts. Our fondness and personal attachment to these novels meant that we taught them using the least controversial approaches possible: the American dream with *The Great Gatsby* and censorship with *Fahrenheit 451*. Consequently, it took years for us to question our nostalgia for the use and teaching of these books. Specifically, as part of a larger research project (Hadley and Toliver) analyzing canonical texts read by preservice teachers in our teacher education courses, we reread both *The Great Gatsby* and *Fahrenheit 451*, looking for how these texts defined and illustrated to readers who is made Other (Derida and Dufourmantelle), who is made monstrous (Cohen), and who is always offered and denied hospitality in American society. This reading brought forward parts of the text that we had always glossed over in our personal and classroom readings and teachings (see Figure 2). We found that both of the texts demonstrated an aggressive commitment to whiteness, racism, and ethnocentrism.

Of course, we asked ourselves several important questions upon this realization: How did we miss both novels' commitments to oppression in our earlier readings and teachings? What does it mean that we were complicit in ignoring some of the broader issues of white supremacy in these narratives? How did we as teachers embody some of the characteristics of the very characters we found so problematic in these stories? To examine our own collusion in the teaching of these texts in ways that dismissed the oppression embedded within them, we turn to an

analysis of two characters from these novels—Daisy from *The Great Gatsby* and Mildred from *Fahrenheit 451*—to better understand how pedagogical evasion is a form of complicity, how that complicity can compound itself when unexamined, and how we are currently conceptualizing resistance to complicity by embracing a continuously critical approach to texts and pedagogy.

THE DAISY DILEMMA

Near the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Tom, Daisy, Nick, and Jordan have dinner together, and as they are eating and chatting, the conversation takes a eugenics-fueled, racist, and ethnocentric turn:

“Civilization’s going to pieces,” broke out Tom violently. “Have you read ‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard? . . . This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things.”

“We’ve got to beat them down,” whispered Daisy, winking ferociously toward the fervent sun. (Fitzgerald 17–18)

Later, Daisy returns to this topic as a way to conceal the contents of her conversation with Nick from Tom:

“Did you give Nick a little heart to heart talk on the veranda?” demanded Tom suddenly.

“Did I?” [Daisy] looked at me. “I can’t seem to remember, but I think we talked about the Nordic race. Yes, I’m sure we did. It sort of crept up on us and the first thing you know . . .” (Fitzgerald 23–24)

In Heidi’s teaching of this section (and other equally racist sections) of the book, she would point out to students the way that Tom is made more unlikable by this outburst, that even his wife subtly makes fun of him, “winking ferociously” while sardonically agreeing with him in order to signal to other guests how ridiculous he seems. Once Heidi had established that Tom is problematic because he is racist, and that we, as readers, are not meant to like him because he is racist, she would move on—the chapter ends with the first introduction to Gatsby’s obsession with the green light at the end of the dock, after all, and students would need significant scaffolding to



FIGURE 2
An editorial opinion piece Stephanie wrote about the timeless qualities of *Fahrenheit 451* (posted on Blavity)

fully appreciate the symbolism. And, like all teachers, Heidi was pressed for time. As she was a white woman teaching in a nearly all-white community, her pedagogical evasion of any meaningful or challenging discussion about racism in the text and in the United States was never challenged.

When we revisited the text, we both identified this passage as racist and noted the ways that Tom's character reflects the pseudoscientific, white supremacist fixations of eugenics movements. We noted how the text's construction of whiteness as Nordic reflects a historically narrower definition of whiteness that excludes ethnicities which are currently largely categorized as white, and we wondered why Heidi hadn't talked about any of this with her students.

Our more critical approach also caused us to see Daisy's actions as more than just disdain for her husband's pretentiousness. Instead, Daisy makes herself complicit in her husband's racism by the blithe violence of her sarcastic response, her winking, and her general disregard for the topic. She is complicit when she glibly refers back to his tirade in order to avoid disclosing that she talked about her own unhappiness with Nick on the veranda. We characterized Daisy as the kind of person who finds racist diatribes to be more socially acceptable than personal details from her life, the kind of person who says the exact same things racists say while winking furiously to let you know that it's a joke, although it's not really.

As we sat with the text a little longer, we realized that while we had a lot of critiques to make about Daisy, she was also an apt metaphor for our critiques of our past teaching approaches. Heidi's unwillingness to engage with the pervasive commitment to whiteness, racism, and ethnocentrism within the text of *The Great Gatsby* beyond noting that racism makes a character unlikable was, in its own way, a "ferocious winking" to smooth over or cover up the need for conversation about current commitments to whiteness. At the time, she justified the pedagogical evasion by using excuses that included a lack of time for further or deeper engagement, the importance of other parts of the book, and concerns that, as a white woman, she might not know how to have a meaningful conversation about race. The

hurry to fully scaffold the concept of the green light at the end of the dock rather than to scaffold students' understanding of the socially constructed and power-laden conception of race and ethnicity within their own communities was certainly an act of pedagogical evasion.

As teachers, all of us have these moments where, in hindsight, we see that we winked at something we should have addressed; we steered around a difficult topic because we didn't feel prepared to discuss it; or we downplayed a problematic comment in order to smooth the social interactions within the classroom. This Daisy-esque approach to teaching is a common form of pedagogical evasion, but if we don't continuously examine our own pedagogy, our pedagogical avoidance can become even more explicit and problematic.

THE MALAISE OF MILDRED

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred is Montag's wife, a secondary character whose distinct attributes are often glossed over as the protagonist discovers more about the declining society in which he is an active member. Still, Mildred's actions greatly influence the story, as her betrayal of her husband leads to the climax of the novel. Her role in Montag's eventual demise is a major feature of literary analysis, but in centering Montag, it is easy to ignore Mildred's malaise—her discomfort in discussing or even acknowledging the real world; her consistent need to remove herself from feeling and emotion through a submergence into technology; and her unwillingness to critique or challenge authority even when the systems of power are crumbling all around her. Even as Montag attempts to alert her to the issues he is facing, she runs away, scared that she will have to deal with the world or that she will need to address these issues in

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any meaningful way. Mildred is a shell of a person, a being so distanced from emotion and so willing to submerge herself in fantasy that she has no awareness of or care for reality.

After rereading *Fahrenheit 451* for our larger project, we were alarmed by this portrait of Mildred, as we wondered how a person could get to the point where they would ignore oppressive aspects of the world order to preserve their individual fantasies of happiness and pleasantness. We considered several moments in the text where Mildred shows her distance from humanity. In one instance that affects much of the plot, Montag attempts to discuss his feelings about the murder of a woman who dared to keep books in her home:

“Mildred?” he called. She returned, singing, snapping her fingers softly. “Aren’t you going to ask me about last night?” he said.

“What about it?”

“We burned a thousand books. We burned a woman.”

“Well?” . . .

“Mildred, how would it be if, well, maybe I quit my job awhile?”

“You want to give up everything? After all these years of working, because, one night, some woman and her books—”

“You should have seen her, Millie!”

“She’s nothing to me; she shouldn’t have had books. It was her responsibility, she should’ve thought of that. I hate her. She’s got you going and next thing you know we’ll be out, no house, no job, nothing.” (Bradbury 48–49)

In this example, Mildred is disturbed, not because a woman is gruesomely murdered for owning books, but because this knowledge and Montag’s sadness keep her from her television, disrupting the fantasy of life she’s created for herself.

When Stephanie read and taught the text, she mentioned Mildred’s despondency and facilitated discussions about her consistent apathy, but the focus was always on her need for technology and her desire to disassociate with reality at any cost. Stephanie never highlighted how Mildred’s actions resembled those of so many who see the suffering of others but refuse to speak in order to preserve their own pleasant, fantastical worlds. She never facilitated

conversations about Mildred’s consistent need to hide from reality and ignore any fact that alerted her to the true evils in the world. She never asked students to think about Mildred’s disengagement, nor how people who detach themselves from the world often hate those who ask them to consider other realities, other truths, other lives.

But, as we read the text years after Stephanie taught it in her ninth-grade classroom, we realized that, in our own teaching, we had acted in ways that mirrored Mildred’s behaviors. We had ignored the over-presence of whiteness in the novels to preserve our fantasies of these books as timeless narratives that all should read, delicious to our souls. We concealed the overt racism and ethnocentrism in the text to submerge ourselves in conversations that we believed were more palatable in our teaching contexts. We were uneasy about “giv[ing] up everything” (our jobs, our houses, our livelihoods) to critique or challenge the books we held dear. In this way, we were engaging in teaching practices that resembled Mildred’s malaise, even as we thought we were critically engaging our students in important discussion of the texts.

Although we had not completely become teaching shells, our complicity in pedagogical evasion resulted in us becoming Mildred, withdrawing from hard truths in order to preserve our feelings and interests. Looking back, we wonder how we would have responded to students, parents, and political systems in the current moment. If discussions of police brutality, anti-Blackness, book bans, and anti-trans violence were brought to us during that time, would we have said, “Well?” and retreated into our fantasy of responsibility avoidance? Would we ignore reality because it brought discomfort? Of course, we would love to say that we would most certainly take up these important points and connect them to the texts we teach, but the chilling effect of controversy often results in Daisy-esque or Mildred-like responses.

REJECTING DAISY AND MILDRED

We understand that we were teaching in a far different context than what currently exists, and that practicing K–12 teachers are working in far more politicized, surveilled environments (Swalwell and Naseem Rodríguez). In fact, in some states and

districts, legislation and policy shifts away from equity and anti-oppression practically make teachers' complicity a requirement of employment. However, from our experience looking back at our own practice and our own literary experiences, we knew we had to make changes to our literary pedagogy, changes that would help us to truly engage in student-centered and equity-based educational practices.

1. We have to acknowledge our positionality as readers, teachers, and humans—but this is more easily said than truly enacted. Both of us wrestled with what it said about *us as people* that we were willing to overlook so much in these texts that we genuinely loved, and what it meant about *us as teachers* that we were willing to impose these texts on students who had their own life experiences and literacy heritages. That genuine reckoning means we don't always get to see ourselves, in retrospect, as the heroes of our own classrooms.
2. We have to commit to *knowing better* by reading the work of scholars and practitioners who help us think about constructing classrooms that truly center equity. For both of us, *knowing better* happened because we reflected deeply on equitable education practices by reading the work of Freire, Ladson-Billings, hooks, and Matias. We developed our own thinking about the inclusion of canonical works in English language arts classrooms by reading and engaging the thinking of scholars like Morrison, Castillo, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, and Ebarvia, Germán, Parker, and Torres. We examined and learned from the practices of other equity-minded English language arts practitioners like Muhammad, Kay, and Love. We often had to search out these texts, and thus, knowing better became an active and ongoing choice.
3. We have to *do better*. If we genuinely want to have classrooms where students feel welcomed, where they have meaningful and genuine intellectual engagement with texts, where we work together to build more

equitable futures, then we as teachers must let go of texts that seemed delicious to us at one point in favor of texts that actually help us do the work we say we want to do with and alongside students. We have to critically and honestly examine the racism, misogyny, and other portrayals of power in the text sets we choose. If both of us could go back in time with our new knowledge, we would choose different texts as whole-class readings, texts that don't make the reader complicit in "winking ferociously" at racism and other problematic portrayals. However, even if adopting new texts were impossible (and we wish to acknowledge that in increasingly surveilled teaching contexts, sometimes it is), we would certainly make substantive changes to how we taught these texts, choosing to linger over and make plain the ferocious winkings and glossed-over inequities, rather than offering trite explanations or ignoring them altogether.

Following our own advice has been difficult because, even as teacher educators who engage in critical pedagogical processes, we still feel connected to our problematic favorites. We still feel the nostalgia, the pull to retreat toward familiar texts we've taught and were taught when we were in secondary school. But Angelou's encouragement to know better and do better means we have to continuously self-reflect and seek out analytical frameworks for both our texts and our pedagogy that enable us to truly interrogate our personal and pedagogical practices. We have to challenge ourselves to be uncomfortable, to pursue discomfort in our teaching because that has led to our overall growth. Again, this has not been easy for us, but students deserve teachers who actively pursue knowing better and doing better. They deserve teachers who refuse to teach like

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Daisy or become Mildred. We will continue to work on ourselves so that our students get the teachers and books they deserve.

CONCLUSION

In recognition of Banned Books Week, Jonna Perrillo argued that even though NCTE and other organizations' efforts to move against the banning of books was admirable, these efforts also "obscured the larger problem at hand: teachers' avoidance of anything controversial or political" and their circumvention of "anything potentially contentious." As an example of this evasion, she noted how teachers often reduce potentially complex stories to "easy truisms or didactic messages that compel little questioning or introspection." In doing so, educators are complicit in avoiding anything that might give rise to some public disagreement. The problem, then, is not just about what books are taught in classrooms, but how we teach the books we select.

In our case, we taught books we felt nostalgia and love for because of our prior teaching and reading experiences. Like Daisy, we winked at the issues in hopes that our students would love the books as much as we did. Like Mildred, we avoided any possible discussion that would remove us from the fantasy world we'd created for ourselves, a world in which these books and these characters were essential to our classroom. We metaphorically put in our earbuds to tune out important conversations about white supremacy and oppression, because it made us feel better about the books we were teaching.

Now, however, we know better, and it took us a long time to know, a long while to engage in the critical reflection needed to critique ourselves. The chilling effect of controversy, real or imagined, is just that: a means to cool down the fire for equity and justice, a way to put out the fire that burns for our creation of more anti-oppressive classroom spaces. However, by continually sharing our stories—of complicity, of evasion, of knowledge-seeking, of growth—it is possible for us to light fires for each other, to provide warmth even in frightening times. The warmth created by building community can help us to stop winking like Daisy, to stop saying

"Well?" like Mildred, and to start dismantling systems of oppression that make complicity feel like the only option. **EJ**

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