



Kozbi Simmons

## Literacy as Emancipation

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“Following the path laid by those running to freedom and living to tell about it, Black memoirists continue to use the motifs of movement and literacy as markers of emancipation,” Imani Perry said in “The Year of Black Memoir” for *Public Books*.

Perry inspires a new pedagogy: literacy as emancipation.

In Baltimore, where most of my high school students are Black and brown, outsiders expect kids to be illiterate with jail or an early death in their future. For them, literacy is not just freedom; it’s proof of life. Students leave class having studied Frederick Douglass and Lorraine Hansberry, Kiese Laymon and Audre Lorde. They read: scanning hundreds of pages, thousands of words; finding dialects they didn’t know existed, imagery that makes their knees hurt, and slang they take turns mimicking; rolling their eyes, shaking their heads, wiping their tears, and holding their bellies from laughing so hard it hurts. And then, they write: telling lies and truths; finding their voices; using emotion and logic and reputation; discovering, speaking, teaching, and learning; they see; they are seen.

Black students must see themselves reflected in the literature they are assigned. Districts could altogether eschew the stale English class canon—British and white American literature, which signifies control, stereotype, or white saviorism, texts with tropes pumped into students as soon as they are exposed to media and school. The canon does not allow for Black liberation; it’s just too white. But instead of erasing the canon and starting over—an unrealistic and ill-informed proposition, they should *complete* it. Even more specifically, the new canon must include nonfiction.

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In *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, Felicia Rose Chavez wrote, “There’s nothing harmful about the [canonical] texts themselves, of course, assuming they’re analyzed in a multidimensional context” (94).

But that isn’t happening, and students are owed far more Chavez acknowledged that finding space for Black and brown students to see themselves in the work we study is a risk. It is “dangerous... to jostle the white dream state awake,” she wrote (95). Yet in a climate of Florida’s Stop WOKE Act and Tennessee’s Divisive Concepts Bill, “completing the canon” is more important than ever. Chavez asked, “Must art’s politics be correct?” And she answered, “Why, yes, if correct means complete. For when else in academia do we strive to be incorrect?” (95).

When districts fail and teachers have the ability to self-select texts, to write our own curriculum, we must choose material that challenges whiteness and questions what we’ve been reciting for decades. Even in districts or schools where curriculum and books are mandated, teachers still can supplement with essays, letters, speeches, and excerpts from authors outside the “classics”—people who demonstrate to Black students that their voice, too, can be, should be, will be heard. These texts (even oft-taught Black texts like Martin Luther King, Jr’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”) have historically not been considered Literature simply because they are nonfiction. They are often considered important, but do not rise to the level of completing the canon.

With hope, teachers one day will not have to shoehorn Black and brown authors into their units. They won’t have to squeeze in pieces of Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* with Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They won’t have to choose *one* Black or brown author for the year between the district’s “modern classics”: Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* or Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. Until then, we who have autonomy to select texts—both primary and supplementary—must use every moment we have to undo the damage done and unlock what awaits. Experiencing literature that represents students as they are—not just reading Black authors’ books, but engaging with them, analyzing together and independently,

writing about them, reacting to them—can lead students into emancipation, show them where they’ve been and where they can go.

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My students begin with Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

“Memoir, the offspring of the slave narrative, is not simply a form within the Black literary tradition; it has thoroughly shaped that tradition,” Imani Perry writes in “The Year of Black Memoir.” “From personal essays to bildungsromans, stories of becoming and remembering are essential to it.”

Douglass’s organic style offers an accessible start to the semester. His protective nature, specifically in refusing to disclose the details of his escape, conveys his loyalty to others who are enslaved, though most never would have read his work. Still, Douglass builds trust and confidence with his modern-day Black reader by doing so. Additionally, he holds accountable the white self-proclaimed Christian reader of the time—and present—in his Appendix, by forcing him to reckon with his hypocrisy.

Douglass opens my students’ journey to literary emancipation with candor and incredible bravery. They read his memoir, chapter by chapter, as the map that it is and begin to create their own. Using rhetorical analysis, a quintessential skill to pair with Douglass’s *Narrative*, they examine each chapter and his Appendix for his use of ethos, pathos, and logos. Students find the value in each technique for argumentative writing and speaking, a tool for emancipation itself. For example, in chapter six, when Douglass writes about becoming literate, he explains how it was his enslaver who unwittingly conveyed to him its exigency. “...The argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both,” Douglass wrote (42). This is one of many quotes in chapter six that serve as evidence for students’ rhetorical triangle analyses. Douglass’s use of emotional appeal, logic and reasoning, and established

credibility are abundant. Interpreting rhetoric like Douglass's, an account of emancipation, enhances students' writing in pursuit of however they will define freedom.

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Reading Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* opens a new lens on the modern world in which my students live. We read about the discrimination forced against the Younger family by the white Clybourne Park neighborhood, and students analyze the irony in the dialogue between Mr. Lindner and Walter Lee, Beneatha, and Ruth. They consider social hierarchy, economic opportunity, internalized racism, and gender roles.

Yet it isn't until we begin supplementing Hansberry's play and connecting to the neighborhoods and opportunities students have now—not 60-plus years ago—that their journey toward emancipation picks up momentum. Lawrence T. Brown, a Morgan State University research scientist, developed findings he coined “The Black Butterfly and the White L” based on the shape of the heavily segregated areas of Baltimore city. With Brown's study and their new knowledge of redlining, students begin by reacting to the idea of “Two Baltimores.” It doesn't take long for them to indicate the racial segregation, but even my Black and brown students don't realize the severity until we read Brown's work. Then, they research—and simply observe—their own neighborhood, its location in the Black Butterfly or White L, and the characteristics that make it fit. Based on their place in the butterfly or L, they identify check cashing businesses v. banks; corner stores v. supermarkets; access or no access to major highways or trains; free v. paid public transportation; higher or lower school funding; higher or lower property taxes; higher or lower rates of violence.

From a chart that lists the “structured advantages” in the White L and “structured disadvantages” in the Black Butterfly, students select two practices they feel are the most important. Options include transportation, enterprise zoning, banking, mortgage lending, small business lending, curfew policies, policing, public housing sites, public schools, property taxes, and food access. They then compare the

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specific advantages and disadvantages of each and prepare a poster presenting their findings with data, photos, text explanations, and a personal response. Students are shocked that much of what they discover are the long-enduring ramifications of redlining.

Students are particularly interested in Brown's attention to Baltimore's Black youth. He wrote, "Not only has Baltimore failed to invest in Black youth, it has actively defunded and closed Black recreation centers and Black public schools... Meanwhile, more funding is poured into hyperpolicing Black youth and neighborhoods while redlining intensifies in the Black Butterfly." Reading the words of a local research scientist who dedicates his work to improving their lives is restorative and it is important to this pedagogy to recognize that much of emancipation is not escape, but restoration.

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After having examined Brown's work and their own neighborhoods, they understand first-hand excerpts from Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations." Coates arms them with an even deeper understanding of the long-lasting damage done. "Redlining destroyed the possibility of investment wherever Black people lived," he wrote. With Brown and Coates having provided the reasoning as to why their lives and neighborhoods have come to be the way they are, students are emboldened. Coates helps them consider what may be owed when he continued with: "An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future."

Together, students create a classroom "Case for Baltimore Reparations" employing the rhetorical analysis strategies learned earlier.

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Emancipation isn't only about place, but place functions as literal and metaphorical foundation. Their road opens up with our core text: *Heavy: An American Memoir*. Kiese Laymon wrote, "[Teachers] never once said the words: 'economic inequality,' 'housing discrimination,' 'sexual violence,' 'mass incarceration,'"

“homophobia,” “empire,” “mass eviction,” “post traumatic stress disorder,” “white supremacy,” “patriarchy,” “neo-confederacy,” “mental health,” or “parental abuse,” yet every student and teacher at that school lived in a world shaped by those words” (114). All of my students have confronted the trauma and malevolence of which Laymon speaks, but few have had the opportunity or space—at school or home—to discuss it. *Heavy* offers students what they didn’t know they needed.

In Laymon’s intro, students confront the implications of an unreliable narrator. The author repeatedly writes that he “wanted to write a lie.” Addressing his mother via the second-person point of view, he admits to grappling with the truth—to protect her, to make his book salable, and to shield himself. He wrote that lie, he says, but he “discovered nothing.” So, he wrote *Heavy*, instead. Students, at first, bristle at the intro. Trust does not come easily. Why read a book by a lying author? But when pushed to consider their own truths—and whether they would find it easy to disclose them to the world, to confront the people who most harmed them—they empathize. Many have been raised in homes with the oft-shouted mantra “What happens in this house, stays in this house.” For them, it is sacrilegious to air the family’s dirty laundry, to complain about a parent’s actions—let alone to confront them in a published book. Putting themselves at Laymon’s laptop, they realize his was an act of bravery.

Students compose a brief intro of their own, beginning with “I wanted to write a lie.” They determine the audience, content, and format. Unlike Laymon, their narrative will not be published in the thousands, but the exercise forces them to consider his desire for *wanting* to lie. Sometimes looking in the mirror, realizing that you first have to face yourself and your own truth is itself a step toward freedom.

Within the first few chapters, students encounter difficult themes: sexual violence, homophobia, eating disorder, parental abuse. In chapters 2-4, he repeatedly asks “why” and says, “I didn’t understand” and “I was confused.” The trauma he witnessed and experienced was beyond what his adolescent body and mind could process. Students, then, are charged with helping young Laymon learn, in turn teaching themselves and peers. In “The Why Project,” students are grouped and assigned a theme prevalent thus far

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in the text. For many, like the author, the subject matter is difficult and something they've also never heard discussed in school. For their project, students research the topic, find and analyze evidence in the text, explore and produce art representing the topic, and present to the class.

A critical element of emancipation is social consciousness. Understanding issues like eating disorder and homophobia, whether or not they personally are affected, is a step toward developing empathy. By informing themselves and each other about societal ills—like child and sexual abuse—through assignments like “The Why Project,” students learn that emancipation relies on humanity.

Laymon writes about LaThon and Jabari, two of his friends, who often talk about “Black Abundance” (the title of section II) and, the opposite, how being white means being “Meager” (the title of chapter 5). The three teens’ dialogue prompts a class discussion about white supremacy culture (WSC) and its pervasiveness in students’ lives. When we dissect the characteristics of WSC, students often begin a debate about the value of these traits. Some argue the characteristics hold importance, regardless of their cultural origin. While others say they finally “feel seen,” particularly when it comes to the fear of open conflict and defensiveness they frequently witness in white people. Students are given the opportunity to write or produce—in any format, including alternative media—their own piece about WSC. It can include a personal experience or a general opinion. We use Joe Truss’s (@TrussLeadership) October 2020 Twitter thread, called [“Whiteness \(a thread\)”](#) as an example.

Students’ voices are becoming louder, their footfalls stronger as we explore Literacy as Emancipation, especially with Laymon’s help. In chapter 9, our theme is boosted when the author explicitly shares what freedom is to him—at least at the time: being away from his mother and being able to eat what he wants. It’s a painful time in Laymon’s life, but for him to have found some solace in the independence shows students possibilities that await—particularly parting from parents. Many students relate to Laymon’s need for escape. Using the author’s words as inspiration, students examine what makes them feel free and devise their own way of showing it. Some have created apps, while others have written

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scenes. Others, still, have performed dances, and a few have painted pictures. Freedom, sprung from literature, is boundless.

At college, students learn along with Laymon about feminism, the patriarchy, and intersectionality. Laymon takes courses, but it's his friend, Nzola, who gives him an authentic education. She, too, helps students. Through her and Laymon's experience, her words and actions, and Laymon's response, they grasp vital ideas in order to become free. After further independent research, we watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's [We Should All Be Feminists TEDTalk](#) and finish with a silent freewrite, in which students consider their own perspectives and experiences on feminism, the patriarchy, and intersectionality.

After finishing *Heavy*, I ask students to compose their own memoir. We discuss the components of the form, and they choose a moment in their lives about which they will write. We look back on all our texts, but *Heavy* is our core example. Laymon's language, his structure, his diction are a model. Their memoirs are never meager. In mining their past, they are finding their way forward. Enriched with the thousands of words we've read, students are equipped to write about their own experiences with new mastery. Students who have been hesitant to express themselves now feel empowered; others, who are always enthusiastic, find new ways of telling their stories—unleashing metaphors and imagery.

“I had to be around eight-years-old the first time I witnessed a grown-ass man put hands on my mom.” “That day, I lost trust in my brother.” “My father had a book: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.” “A chance to do better, a chance to be better.” “Momma, you swear you pray for me when I'm outside... but there was a time when God couldn't have heard that prayer.”

By the time my students finish his book, Laymon has [met with them on Zoom multiple times](#), a life-changing experience. He has empowered them to open up—not just about books, but about life, fear, love, and hope. They, too, have challenged him to think, to listen. In the essay he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, he wrote about his visit to my class—

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I am on my knees wondering why I am energized, satisfied, but not sobbing. Sixty-eight young people from Baltimore did what our geriatric presidential candidates and moderator could not do the night before. They used word patterns they'd never used. They talked freshly about fear of isolation. They collectively unraveled how capitalism encourages a speed that makes love, pleasure, and actual contemplation nearly impossible. They wondered why school didn't teach them how to gracefully lose and graciously win. They made critiques of the nation and critiques of themselves. They listened to each other toe the thinnest of lines between yearning for pleasure and aching for escape. They accepted that they are worthy of the most exquisite joy. They argued vigorously about the ethics of seeking pleasure at the expense of essential workers, like many of their parents, who put their lives on the line for a tomorrow filled with remedies to overdue rent, grocery bills, bludgeoning debt. They wondered how to make essential labor into pleasurable labor for essential laborers when the nation insists on treating them as expendable at best, and big-hearted collateral damage at worst.

I was struck by this, not just the engagement with 12th graders, or what they gave to him, but how what he took away was a reminder that hope for the future can be found everywhere. I would not have expected less, but my students never imagined a hot-shot author would give them the time of day, let alone answer their questions about his words. His time—the most valuable gift he has to offer—has made all the difference on their journey. He has proven to them that they will find their way, that they are that Black Abundance.

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Finally, students and I conclude with Audre Lorde's 1977 essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Lorde writes, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (40). Students will have found that each writer we studied took those risks, but they,

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like Lorde, will draw the same conclusion: “The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence... And there are so many silences to be broken” (44).

“Transformation” empowers students to make their journey’s final step of contemplation and analysis—reading, journaling, note-taking—to creation and synthesis through original memoirs, performances, visual arts. The speech serves as a culmination. They write and perform it. They can pull from any of their previous work, such as their rhetorical analysis, their “Case for Baltimore Reparations,” their “I wanted to write a lie” intro, their WSC piece, their feminism freewrite, their memoir, or anything else they’ve produced, as well as original writing.

Students reflect on their voyage: the times (1845 to 2021); the places (Maryland, Chicago, Mississippi, New York, Pittsburgh); the genders and sexualities (male, female, straight, gay, lesbian); the socioeconomics (enslaved, poor, middle class, upper class); the violence (sexual abuse, parental abuse, eating disorder, enslavement, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, neglect, the patriarchy). And it goes on.

Having started with Douglass’s account, students were greenlit with the inspiration and significance of literacy as a vehicle to self-reliance. Moving through Hansberry’s drama and Brown’s research, they bore witness to historical wrongs still impacting modern lives. Coates’s ground-breaking work illustrated new possibilities. In Laymon, students read their families, their homes, their schools, their faces—and maybe for the first time, their futures. Truss and Adichie showed them new ways to approach literacy. And Lorde reminded them, one last time, of the “silences to be broken.” Meditation on their performance—reading, writing, projects—provides students an opportunity to view the unit as the route to emancipation it is. They have been outfitted with new vocabulary, context, history, comprehension, and power. They have used—and will continue to use—that knowledge to speak, write, vote, record, post, publish, and produce. With words, they were transformed. With words, they will be seen.

Literacy as emancipation: “Running to freedom and living to tell about it.”

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