

May 3, 2019

A Letter to My Students: Ni**as in English

Dear students,

Please do not take offense to the title of this letter. It is a play on a 2011 song called “[Ni**as in Paris](#)” by Jay-Z and Kanye West from an album called *Watch the Throne*. That song is about breaking barriers, being allowed into spaces where ni**as ostensibly don’t belong or aren’t found, seen, or welcomed. Spaces and places like Paris, the Louvre, sipping Ace of Spades champagne—which at the time cost \$600 a bottle—spending the night in hotels that go for \$6,000 per night. All very Parisian, decadent, expensive, and opulent. All very stereotypically un-Black.

I studied that song in an English class in 2013 with a group of mostly young Black men who were also part of a learning community. Their community was designed to improve the literacy rates of Black men, and it was a program out of Southwest College in deep Los Angeles. We looked at the song in combination with debating whether or not the n-word should be used. We looked at how it has been used in Rap music over the years, starting with NWA’s use of it as a threat and finally getting to Jay and Kanye using it as a celebration. (By the way, you should also check out this song called “[Murder to Excellence](#)” on that *Watch the Throne* album. It also talks about Black folx being in places they aren’t expected to be in...and the places we are, like coffins. It’s all so very diunital. Maybe we will explore what *diunital orientation* means one day in class. It could be helpful for understanding us.)

The song and the controversies embedded in it remind me of higher education (colleges and universities) and the perspective of them from a Black student’s eyes. I don’t doubt, by the way, that Black students’ views aren’t parallel with other groups of students who are “new” to these places. A lot can be written and discussed about what an institute of higher learning looks like from a young, millennial’s eyes. I am an English teacher though, and I feel the need to ask about the experiences of Black students in English classrooms.

Throughout my life, I attended schools that were culturally diverse. They were diverse on purpose. My last years of elementary school, I went to Monlux Magnet School in North Hollywood, CA. The school actually had quotas: They were looking to accept a certain number of Black students, Asian students, etc. I did well there in my English classes. One reason why is that I read a lot at the time. I breezed through books and mimicked the characters, their vocabulary, looked up words, read along to books-on-tape or LP (an early version of audio books). As a result, those vocabulary words, sentence structures and the creativity that reading perked showed up in my work. I wrote creatively: short stories and poems. My book reports were on fleek, too. My 6th grade teacher, the one whose name is the answer to my security question when I forget my passwords, usta read my shit out loud to the class. I usta cringe when she did that. I did not like being known as smart. I did not like to stand out as a “teacher’s pet” or to even be suspected as her favorite. But, real talk, I knew my writing was good and I was proud of it. Why would I feel so embarrassed about my good-ass writing?

It was because it caused a divide between me and many of my Black classmates. They did not think it was cool to be called out for doing good work, so they scoffed. They laughed at me. They distanced themselves from me. They said I talked like I was white. There are other reasons why I think they didn’t fully accept me (I am biracial), but the being liked by the teacher because I wrote well, that part was a deep part of it.

This is the start of my critical reflection of being a ni**a in an English classroom. It taught me to dumb down my abilities. It taught me to get with the program, get with what the Black kids in English are “supposed” to do. Sit in the back. Hoodie on. Class clown. Flirt. Sell some weed. Whatever it took to not be successful.

In middle school, I changed schools. I started a school in a PW area; hence, the school was a PWI and had a healthy dose of elitist kids. I was still killing it at writing and felt more comfortable raising my hand in class and participating. Partly because one of my teachers was dope, and she looked out for me, praised my writing, and did NOT tell the students the piece was mines when she read my work out loud to class. But a teacher does not have the same pull as peers. So, I got in with the new group of girls, some Black, some Brown, some Filipina, some white with the chola-ass hair or Cross Colours, and we did our thing. We were like an annoying group of rebels. We would walk up and down the halls intoning “Hoo Hoo” and yelling out our tribe’s names (ask me later) during brunch and lunch. We were loud and popular and “out there.” I won “Most Popular” that year. I guess I had some of the acceptance that I wanted in elementary school. But that popularity came with the cost of being this image of cool and hiding my smarts.

Cool, to me, means that no matter the circumstance, you are not worried. It means that even though that girl you like makes nervous as hell, you are so suave when she comes around. It means appearing not to give a fuck when you really do. And to remain popular and cool, I had to become an opposite of a part of me. I had to pretend not be a good student, not be a good essayist, not be interested in class. Classic *Saved by the Bell* shit. So around 9th grade (first year of high school), I began to cut class and do some of the stuff you would expect to see in an after school special.

So I don’t really remember much about English classes in high school. But maybe four things about being a ni**a in those classes—my high school was also a PWI—stand out:

1. I remember being assigned to read *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* in 9th or 10th grade. I remember being so lost, so unattracted, so mired by the question of why anyone would call these books “great literature” or a “classics.”. It missed the mark of who I was at the time. I did not get it, and yet the presumption of my English lit teachers was that I should or would. Or that I needed to know this to be considered educated or well-read. Being educated or well-read, kind of like that Paris scene that Jay and ‘Ye were stormin. It made me NOT want to be in that “well-read” club, but also feel bad about not being in that club. It made me feel uncultured. I question that now.
2. Though I bucked at writing and reading John Steinbeck novels, I wrote and read and was organically autodidactic. You know *autodidactic* means? It’s one of the best words in the world, and I say this as a teacher. It means to be self-educated. Teaching yo’self. Following yo curiosities about topics that matter to you. I was autodidactic in two main ways; first, by becoming a gifted rapper. I wrote and freestyled, inspired by one of the best rhymers you’ve never heard of, a guy named Devon Henry. Devon was a guy who lived in my apartment complex, a recent Jamaican migrant, a junior or a senior when I was a freshman. For some reason, he took me under his wing, and eventually, I hopped in on one of his flows. And killed it. The rest is high school history. From there, we not only freestyled, but wrote lyrics to tracks. I guess them elementary school vocabulary-building days paid off.

3. I still read. I wanted to learn about my history. See, at the time, I hadn't lived a Black experience. As I said earlier, I am biracial, and I was raised by the Quesadas, who had emigrated to the States from Costa Rica when my mom was 12 (1969). I was born ten years later. My dad, James Turner, either bounced or was scared off by Mr. Quesada, my grandfather (my mom's dad). I don't know what his perceptions were about Black men, but if people today still continue to feel threatened by Black men, I can see how my grandpa could be, in 1979. In his defense, he loved and spoiled his granddaughter though (me!), never made me feel different or unloved. Weird how he could switch up like that, if he did harbor negative perceptions of Black men.

Anyways, not knowing about my "Black side," I checked out books about from the library. I learned about MLK and the Panthers through books and movies I borrowed. I even became a Black Panther for a time, hecka militant in my PW community and schools. Looking back, I am proud that I taught myself. I am proud that I filled in the gaps of my learning that I was not getting at my high school or from being a semi-hoodlum.

4. Journalism and creative writing class. I don't remember my teacher's name, but I remember doing really cool assignments for my creative writing class in 10th or 11th grade. I wrote scripts and love stories, even one about a gay teen (me, disguised as a gay boy) crushin hard on this other boy (my high school crush. The love wasn't returned). I also remember writing a few things for *The Smoke Signal*, the name of the high school newspaper. One piece I wrote on was the concern about the underground marijuana scene at my school—cannabis was and still is a Schedule I drug, according the feds—calling out the student body for falling under the influence and asking them if it was really even worth it. Is marijuana even that serious? I remember getting mad props from the students and the teachers for that piece.

Three out of four of these high school experiences imply an inadequacy of English classrooms. They failed to grab, they failed to see, and they failed to allow me to be creative and critical in my own way. I don't want to commit a post hoc fallacy by blaming one thing. And that's not the point. The point is that there is a failure, and it almost lost a good kid, a good writer, and aight educator.