*Ghost Boys* and Police Brutality: Addressing the 2020 Racial Protests in the English Classroom

**Introduction**

 The summer of 2020 was certainly one for the record books. The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 at the hands of Minneapolis police “captured the public consciousness unlike few other events in American history” (Nakhaie & Nakhaie 1). Many were calling this murder of an unarmed Black man the tipping point of race relations in the U.S., as the masses galvanized with a newfound focus on racial justice and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Despite simultaneously fighting COVID-19, millions of people protested in the streets across the country to speak out against police brutality. All the while, I began to ponder how the protests were affecting my students, and my thoughts quickly shifted to my curriculum for the upcoming school year.

I felt compelled to address the racial tension that appeared to be bursting at the seams in the U.S., but as a White, Jewish teacher in north central Alabama, I was nervous to do so. I teach at suburban Tin Mill Middle School (TMMS), which has 326 students (51% White, 42% Black, and 5.5% Latinx), and this racial diversity mirrors the population of the large metropolitan city in which the students live. With millions of people becoming unemployed due to COVID-19, I was concerned that addressing a hot-button issue like police brutality and BLM, in a conservative state like Alabama no less, could put me out of work, and I simply could not risk that. While having administrators who already reviewed and approved of my unit plan was of great assistance to my own piece of mind as I went to sleep each night, I was still concerned about parental and community blowback. I had ordered a class set of Jewell Parker Rhodes’ heartbreaking and beautiful novel *Ghost Boys* in spring 2020, which addresses Black youth killed by police, but I was unable to teach it since my district went virtual after the coronavirus hit. I had a new class set waiting for me at school, but teaching remotely, I was unable to assign the story. Because of the protests during the summer, I could not decide what to do about teaching the novel, so I just put the lesson on the back burner to simmer for a little while.

When the school year began in fall 2020, I was still undecided about whether to teach *Ghost Boys*. I kept questioning whether the book was too fresh of a wound to touch, and I was even rethinking if sixth graders were too young to address such issues as police violence in school. I ultimately made my decision after I read a student’s reflection based on a wonderful novel we were reading at the time that also addresses racism, *Necessary Roughness* by Marie G. Lee. While reading a news article and discussing the problem of reignited racism against Asian Americans due to the coronavirus, and its connection with the racism the protagonist faces in the story, I asked the students: “After reading "'Ching chong! You have Chinese virus!'" by Wang, reflect upon what you have just read. What are your thoughts/feelings about what is happening to Asians in this country due to COVID-19?” Revel[[1]](#footnote-1) decided to take another route in his reflection. The Black student explained in his online journal that:

Around age 7 my mom told me I couldn’t go outside with a hoodie on even if it was winter during the day. She showed me a news report about an African American boy who was shot and killed a couple of days before then (from my own neighborhood), because the police officer thought he was a 'bad guy' because he couldn’t see him. She told me she didn’t want to scare me but to warn me about the real/adult world where you can’t just run randomly outside and talk to strangers.

I did not mention racism against Black people in my reflection prompt regarding the novel, yet Revel shared a very valuable perspective with me.

After reading Revel’s thoughts, I knew what I had to do. I decided to go ahead with my unit titled “Understanding the Protests of 2020” with *Ghost Boys* as the central text. According to Christensen, “Many or [our] students experience injustice…often [our] students are targeted because of their race or language or immigration status…Connecting [social justice] issues to the literature we read, as well as writing and talking about their concerns makes them visible” (4). Therefore, I had an obligation to every student to address the contentious issue of police brutality at my middle school, where 49.5% of the students in my grade were Black. Quite simply, racism is an issue that affects us all, and this was an opportune time to discuss it. While I certainly had a fear of reprisal, it became obvious that it was more important for me to help my students explore and understand the racial tumult they observed just a few months earlier. I thought it was my responsibility as a social justice educator to focus on the potential benefits for all my students who live in a “society that is deeply separate and unequal by race” (DiAngelo 1). Furthermore, it was important for me, as a White educator, to continue to learn about race, social justice, police brutality, and the racism some of my students faced on a daily basis.

**Unit Background**

 The purpose of the new unit was to read and analyze current-event texts in order for the students to better understand the issues that led to the mass protests in the U.S. during the summer of 2020. I did not want to wade too deeply into the issues of White privilege and systemic racism with my sixth graders; due to my students’ age and the sensitivity of the topic, I thought that it would probably be best to wait to cover those important issues in more depth with high school and/or university students. I obviously had an agenda teaching the unit (i.e., better understanding racism and police brutality in the U.S. and how it affects us), but I attempted to keep the focus solely on Black males killed by police. It has been asserted that, “Individual officers are not solely responsible for incidents of police brutality but, instead, are reflecting a historical and deeply ingrained anti-Black bias that pervades all aspects of life in this country” (DiAquoi 512). While I agree with that sentiment completely, I only wanted to provide the students with an overview of the issues of police brutality and racial inequality as they specifically related to the BLM protests of 2020. *Ghost Boys* fit perfectly into my unit as a textual base. Written in 2018, the novel is quite relevant in today’s contentious sociopolitical climate. *Ghost Boys* tells the story of a twelve-year-old Black boy named Jerome who is killed by a White police officer in inner-city Chicago. As a ghost, Jerome befriends the officer’s daughter and helps her understand the complexities of racial fear which leads her on her own journey of exploration and newfound activism. While being quite poignant and realistic with the many emotions involved in the police shooting of a child, the novel does not lay blame on entire groups of people (e.g., the police), so I think it does a wonderful job of not alienating any particular groups of young readers, which could be a possible concern.

**“Understanding the Protests of 2020” Unit**

I began the unit by posting the testimonial by Revel on an otherwise blank Schoology page. I explained to the students that police shootings was an issue that needed to be discussed and might be uncomfortable for some students. I then asked the students to reflect upon what they had just read in their online journals. I knew, from years of social justice research and teaching at the university level, that reaching the White students would be the bigger challenge in the classroom. According to DiAngelo, as a White person:

As I move forward through my day, racism just isn’t my problem. While I am aware that race has been used unfairly against people of color, I haven’t been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine, as long as I haven’t done anything I am aware of, racism is a nonissue. (55)

As a result, many White people feel absolved of playing any role in racism and also feel uncomfortable addressing issues of race. Approaching racism and police brutality is not an easy task, and that is no different living and teaching in the deep south. I had to tread lightly and try to avoid laying blame on particular groups in order to prevent my White students from putting up walls and shutting down on me. I just wanted to present the facts and let the students try to come to their own conclusions. Unfortunately, it was not a surprise to see some White students being skeptical immediately. For example, Chelsea, a White student, said in her reflection about the testimonial that:

Black people are discriminated against because of race. Sure, this is true in some cases. If someone read this, they would say ‘You only say that because you’re white.’ Truth is, I think that most of the people who end up on the news, are just bad people. That [officer], the one who choked [George Floyd], was probably racist. See, it could go either way given you never hear anyone talk about when black people shoot white people, because apparently white people are the only ‘racist’ ones. Maybe there are just more white cops, so that's one of the reasons why black people have a higher death risk? I don’t know, that’s not for me to tell.

I was certainly expecting responses like Chelsea’s - ones that had a tone of defensiveness and attempted to change the subject. She shifted the focus of fear of the police to Black people killing White people, which is not even an issue addressed in the testimonial. The reality is that we are all victims of the media’s “characterizations of racial/ethnic minorities of police violence [and] they serve as a rationale for blaming these [Black] victims for their own deaths” (Dukes and Gaither 791). While well aware of this, I had to be patient and not beat my students over the head with my knowledge of racism and social justice. Once I begin to pull at the thread of racist understanding, it is hard for me to stop, so I certainly had to be patient during this unit and let things unfold naturally. I was immediately reminded that other students might have had a different interpretation of the testimonial. Sidney, a Black student shared that:

Our parents tell us not to drive with loud music because you will be a target to the cops, they tell us not to drive with over three people in the car because that is also making you a target. We are told not to wear bonnets and du-rags outside the house because it makes us fit into the stereotype.

Like Revel’s initial testimonial, Sidney clearly understood the expectations that many Black people have in dealing with the police, even at the age of 11. In addition, Kennadi, a Black student, discussed in her reflection that:

I have had many conversations with my family about situations like [Revel’s]. We have discussed what to do when you get pulled over, how to treat the police, and what you can and cannot do based on the color of your skin. It is hard knowing that innocent people, that look just like me, are killed all the time only because of their skin or because they look ‘suspicious’ or ‘dangerous.’ I am aware that certain rules apply to certain people and that those people can’t break those rules without a high chance of getting killed or tormented.

Perspective plays an important role in the interpretation of the initial testimonial, and my job was to attempt to help the White students see what many of their Black peers have already learned as children growing up in the U.S. Research has shown that Black youth are often afraid of the police, for good reason. Black people who live in poorer communities are stopped, questioned, and arrested at significantly higher rates than White youth (Lee and Robinson 145). Again, the key was to teach the unit as impartially as possible and to have all of the students be a part of the exploration and analysis, and not trigger students’ defenses.

As background information before beginning the novel, I read the article “Getting Killed by Police is a Leading Cause of Death for Young Black Men in America” together with the students so that they could see that Black people are killed by police 2.5 times more than White people even though they are a much smaller percentage of the population (Khan). This number was shocking to some students and completely believable and unsurprising to others, as Isabella, a Black student affirmed:

I believe those numbers. I know those numbers. In my community we have had young Black men be shot by police and left there to die. That is what happened to one of my dad’s best friends. Another one was shot at a nightclub and just left there. The numbers don't lie. I think it is a real problem in the USA as a whole and not just Alabama.

Many students have had experience with police violence in their own communities, and it is difficult to read about this as their teacher. Due to my race and income level, I just do not see the lived reality that many of my students do on a daily basis. My students are essential for my understanding of the issue as well. Lamar, a Black student, expressed his frustration with police violence when he stated that:

I hate that African American parents have to have ‘the talk’ with their kids and I can’t imagine how hard it is. My mom had to have the same talk with my brother when he learned to drive. Honestly, I think calling the police for help is scary for black men because sometimes [police] don’t treat the situation correctly which could result in the death of the man.

It is shocking and upsetting that I have only recently learned about “the talk,” “A centuries-old feature of Black life, descriptions of the way Black parents prepare their children for encounters with police, and bias more broadly” (DiAquoi 513). It was essential that I share this knowledge for the betterment of all of my students. Knowing breeds compassion.

Soon after beginning *Ghost Boys* with the students, we read an article titled “How George Floyd's Death Ignited a Racial Reckoning That Shows No Signs of Slowing Down” (McLaughlin). The article explained briefly how the protests after the death of George Floyd was a culmination of several factors, including a spate of similar police killings at the time and the shutdown caused by COVID-19, which led to more people being witness to the racial events due to being at home. By reading the article, my hope was to crack open the door for my White students to see that the world as they see it might not be as things really are for everyone. The students continued to journal electronically about their personal thoughts and feelings about the novel and its connection to the news article. Ashley, a White student stated that:

The most scary thought is about its police officers. You learn in school that police officers are some of the best people in the world because they help, [and] now reading this [article] and some prior knowledge, they don’t give mercy and [they] have the power to harm you even though they are supposed to be the nice guys.

Due to reading news articles with basic statistics, Ashley was beginning to question her preconceived notions about the police and their relationship with the Black community.

In the novel, Emmett Till plays an important role, as he is the “ghost boy” who helps Jerome come to terms with his death and his importance as an influencer on those who can still see him. As I had expected, most of the students had not heard of Emmett Till and his murder in Money, Mississippi in 1955. In order to help create a bridge between the novel and the real world, we read about Emmett Till’s life and death and also watched a short video clip about his murderers’ acquittals and another about Till’s potential impact on the Civil Rights Movement. As Lamar reflected:

What happened to Emmett Till is unexplainable. You can try but will you really feel it? The thing is, if you do more research into it, you will find this happens to African American boys every few days. It is really sad, [and] because of this I understand why Emmett was in *Ghost Boys*.

Students like Lamar did a great job of gleaning the connection between the killing of Till in 1955 and the fictional character of Jerome in 2018. Maybe not that much has really changed in race relations and violence in 65 years, or at least not nearly as much as many White people would like to think.

As we continued to progress through the story, we found out that Jerome’s killer, Officer Moore, had a preliminary hearing for Jerome’s death. Officer Moore, like many real-life police officers, was found to be in his rights as an officer to shoot Jerome and was released without even a trial. To see how this plays out frequently in real life, we read an article titled “Few Police Officers Who Cause Deaths Are Charged or Convicted” (Dewan). Many students were upset to find out that very few officers are ever actually charged with a crime for killing an unarmed Black person. In his personal journal, Revel reflected that:

I hate how cops are able to take a life from someone, and even if they are guilty, they get away with it…I heard a quote when I was younger that I didn’t understand, and it was ‘Any day that we’re (African-Americans) not on the ground is a day we should be thankful for.’ I heard this quote around age 6-7, and I understood it at age 8. It was a quote that always followed me around.

That is quite a message to have to embrace at such a young age. Antoine, a Black boy, also stated that, “I don’t want to live in a world where I can’t walk outside without being classified as a criminal.” Again, I cannot imagine what a horrible burden that must be for Black youth to have to carry around with them all of the time.

The story concludes with Jerome coming to peace with his new role as a ghost boy and helping others fight for social justice since, as he says, “Only the living can make the world better” (Parker Rhodes 204). I asked the students to write a final reflection about the story and its relationship with the real world. Isabella, a Black student, said that:

This [book] was great because many kids might have not heard this story like me. Some people might think ‘kids shouldn’t learn this stuff [so] young,’ [but] I think it’s the perfect time to learn it. It could help kids not make mistakes like [with] Officer Moore.

While I was initially concerned with teaching police brutality to sixth graders, it is good to see that many of the students were ready for such a discussion. Amanda, a White student, seemed to have learned some important lessons from this unit, as well. She explained that:

Based on what I read [this unit], I can completely understand why a black person would feel scared on a normal day. I will never experience the type of hatred that people of color have to deal with. Therefore, I think that it is my responsibility to really listen to these types of things and learn more about what advantages I have other than a black person.

She also added that, “In my opinion, this unit was very much needed. Up until recently, I had no idea about how often black people were murdered. I think that this…unit has opened our eyes to what the real world is actually like.” That was really all I was going for with this unit - to plant the seed and see how it grows.

Unfortunately, not everyone seemed to get the points I was trying to get across. Some students were still disengaged from the topics of racism and police violence (White students, in particular). Chelsea showed this when she stated that, “I honestly am not too obsessed with this topic. I don’t really like talking about these things much. Reflections are different. I think this isn’t something you talk about openly.” I hope that Chelsea realizes someday the position of privilege she is in to live in a country where, as a White girl, she does not have to see race as being important enough to be discussed. It is obvious from the reflections that I received for this unit that many of her Black peers do not feel the same; they simply do not have that luxury.

**Conclusion**

As a White teacher, I could have chosen to ignore the racial protests during the summer of 2020 and just taught any traditional “classic” text instead, like *The Giver*. I have that privilege and power due to my race. While this unit might have been a big pill for some students to swallow at TMMS, I do not regret teaching it in the least. There were (are) just too many racial issues in U.S. society that need to be discussed and analyzed in the middle and secondary classrooms. As ELA teachers, I would like to think that all of us know of Rudine Sims Bishop’s theory of “windows and mirrors.” In other words, for Black voices to be heard, we must read texts by Black authors about issues that focus on concerns of the Black community; Black students need to see themselves in texts and other students need to be able to see them as well. As an educator:

Teaching for joy and justice means creating a curriculum peopled with authors and characters who not only represent our students’ roots, but who also provide a window to the world. The books we choose to bring into our classroom say a lot about what we think is important whose stories get told, whose voices are heard, whose are marginalized. (Christensen 6)

This means more than just reading books that only have characters of color. This means diving headlong into topics that make us nervous because they pose some kind of risk to us as White educators. As Robin DiAngelo asserted, “Interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work because the forces conditioning us into racist frameworks are always at play; our learning will never be finished” (9). Therefore, I urge other White ELA teachers to be uncomfortable and continue to push the boundaries of the literature we teach in the classroom. Quite simply, our students are counting on us to do just that.

**Additional Note**

I wanted to add that I was lucky that, as far as I was aware, only one parent complained to my administration about the appropriateness of teaching a unit on race and police brutality to 11- and 12-year-old students at TMMS. I am unsure of the parent’s racial background, but I have a feeling it was a White parent. Based on the reflections of the Black students, I did not get the feeling that they were opposed to the unit in any way.

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1. All student names are pseudonyms, and I received permission to use all student comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)