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Utopian Promises, Dystopic Realities: Teaching bell hooks “No Love in The Wild”

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“An often-repeated assertion in the body of film criticism I have written is the assertion that movies do not just mirror the culture of any given time; they also create it. With this assertion in mind, I’m leaving a viewing of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* deeply disturbed and militantly outraged by the images I have just seen.”-bell hooks

Introduction:

The 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was highly acclaimed and praised for its cinematography and notable performance by Quvenzhané Wallance, the youngest actress to ever be nominated for Best Actress by the Academy Awards. After reading rave reviews and learning that one of the writers of the film, who loosely based the screenplay on her autobiographical play *Juicy and Delicious*, was from a nearby town, I was intrigued. The film is set in Louisiana, and it was seemingly a testament to the struggle of devastated Gulf-Coast communities post-Katrina. *Beasts of The Southern Wild* is a beautiful, disturbing film about a little girl, Hushpuppy, and her father, Wink, living in a small, rural community called The Bathtub. This fictional utopian community is off the grid and experiences a hurricane that wipes out everything they have. While dealing with this devastation, Wink is dying and trying to teach Hushpuppy to live on her own. Amid the narrative of Hushpuppy and Wink, there are prehistoric beasts, Aurochs, that have been set free from fractured icebergs to roam the Earth and destroy everything in their wake. The film’s frameworks of human versus nature seemingly erases the racist structures that were so clearly projected to the world in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the ostensibly utopian Bathtub community reinforces this myth.

Literary scholars are drawn to the film’s commentary on climate and its use of magical realism, and liken the Aurochs in the film to the real threat of environmental disaster. In fact, Brox (2016) asserts that “the characters in the film view the beasts similarly to the other threats their community faces. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* illustrates that magical realism can bridge reality and fantasy in particularly productive ways when dealing with the imaginative challenges of representing climate change and environmental injustice” (p. 141). Similarly, Burk (2018) states that “it espouses a cosmopolitics that ruptures the human/nature or human/animal binary and therefore rejects a form of racism that invokes species difference to justify victimization” (p. 62). However, Maclear (2018) explains “for Black critics bell hooks, Nyong’o, Brown, and Sharpe the fantasy fails. The film’s narrative difficulties cannot be erased by its noble intentions or good looks, or by its heroic score or flights of magical realism” (p. 614).

hooks (2012), in a post for Mark Anthony Neal’s blog *Black Man in Exile* entitled “No Love In The Wild,” reviews the film and affirms that “the majority of folks [she] talked with, like the reviewers, praised the film’s compelling cinematography, the magical realism, and the poetics of space [which, for them] were the central focus of the film” (para. 1). Antithetical to the film’s fantastical commentary on Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath, the reality of displaced Black bodies was clearly on display as the world watched racialized demographic disparities determine levels of survival after the storm. Therefore, the utopian community depicted in the film and the film’s commentary on environmental concerns is illusory, and hooks’ blog post lays bare the mythological framing that detracts from the patriarchy, racism, and classism within American culture projected in the film.

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Particularly because of the ways in which patriarchy and white supremacy function in the film’s mythology, as hooks (2012) explained in her blog post, audiences often feel as if what is happening in the film is natural, “deploying myth and fantasy we are shown a world in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* where black and white poor folks live together in utopian harmony” (para. 5). hooks’ review of the film is scathing and points out central concerns that are ignored by many.

They are:

Representations of black folks are re-mixes of old racist and sexist stereotypes...Gender is performance in the film ...[and] the camera toys with the child’s body pornographically eroticizing the image...[Wink’s] character is a composite of all the racist/sexist hateful stereotypes that mass media projects about black masculinity...This film expresses a conservative agenda...No wonder then that seeing this film causes some of us to feel a deep sense of hurt and remembered pain. Sorrow for all the lost traumatized children, but especially abused and abandoned black children, whose bodies become the playing fields where pornographies of violence are hidden behind romantic evocations of mythic union and reunion with nature. (hooks paras. 1-20)

Still, many critics, like students in my Introduction to Literature courses, miss the underlying projections of sexist and racist tropes that appear throughout the film.

Rationale:

To encourage students to recognize how popular culture reproduces and reinforces disturbing paradigms, I created a teaching activity based on hooks’ review because I wanted students to be informed while navigating visual images in popular culture. This activity also urged students to interrogate their own positionality through an examination of hooks’ response to the film after they have watched it collectively.

The students at Florida A&M University (FAMU), a public Historically Black College/University, are mostly Black and come from very diverse experiences as related to class, ethnicity, and gender. As a Black woman, I was surprised that only a few of them initially found the film problematic. Because my original assessment of the film aligned with hooks’ review, I wanted to empower students with strategies to analyze film and other visual images that are seemingly progressive but support the strictures and structures that reinforce patriarchy, racism, and classism within American culture.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

Students will:

- Recognize stereotypical tropes about African Americans
- Define positionality
- Analyze visual texts
- Understand feminist theory and its application

These are measurable learning objectives that are applicable to this assignment, but all objectives need not to be included in the teaching activity. One could possibly choose any combination of objectives, choose one, or use all four; it would depend on the time allotted for the activity and the size of the class. The last objective was met through both in class discussions and the writing assignments for this teaching activity. The Introduction to Literature course at FAMU is typically capped at 25 students. This course is designed to introduce students to literary studies and requires them to think analytically, aesthetically, and critically about selected poetry and prose. In my courses, I introduced students to literary theory by giving an overview of theories, or ways

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of reading, that are easily applicable to many of the texts we read throughout the semester: feminist theory, African American literary theory, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis are discussed. The final take home exam asks students to apply three theoretical approaches to any of the course texts using primary and secondary source documents.

Explanation:

Discussions of race, class, and gender in the college classroom can be difficult. Students have been taught that these discussions should be avoided and that the purpose of the introduction to literature space is to understand the *human* condition. Moreover, many students have been taught that the literary canon is unbiased and that their experiences with literature, or the humanities in general, are to extrapolate broad cultural notions like love, life, and death, without understanding that there are clear agendas at play in their educational experiences that privilege white, able bodied, straight, patriarchal perspectives. Misawa (2010) states:

People’s positionality, the power inherent in their immediate respective social positions, greatly influences the differences in what individuals have access to in society ...whether we want it or not, all parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong. Such automatic categorization is embedded in our society as a system and is pervasive in education and at the workplace (p. 26).

Class discussions about the film helped students better understand positionality and it allowed me to model how my own subjectivity informed my reading of certain texts, specifically this film.

Original Teaching Activity Model:

Students first watch the film collectively with the instructor. This is important because the instructor can see the reactions of students to certain moments in the film. Do not allow students to read the blog post before seeing the film. Instead, permit students to respond organically to the images in the film by asking them to express their first gut reactions to the movie as soon as they finish watching. Questions to guide the post-viewing class discussion are:

- What did you think of the film?
- Did you appreciate Wink’s parenting of Hushpuppy?
- Have you experienced “tough love” from a parent or guardian?
- Did you think The Bathtub was a Utopian community?
- Did race, class, and gender matter in the film?

Student Assignment – Write a response to bell hooks film review, “No Love in The Wild,” and determine whether hooks was being hypercritical of the film. Explain your assessment of her review by briefly discussing whether you agree or disagree with her claims.

Students returned to class with their assignment and discussed bell hooks review of the film. Often, Students were not familiar with Black stereotypical tropes so instructors may need to define the following: jezebel, piccaninny, and Black brute; other tropes can enter the conversation, but it is essential to address the ones bell hooks mentioned in her review and the ones that are most apparent in the film. Keep the film queued up in class to point to specific scenes that support the themes, actions, and images in hooks’ review. You may also use images of the aforementioned tropes to illustrate the differences and similarities between the film’s characters and these stereotypes.

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For example:



(google n.d.) (Ferris State University Galleries n.d.)

These images helped facilitate the discussion surrounding hooks claims that *Hushpuppy* is a reimagining of the picaninny trope. The first image was taken from the film as *Hushpuppy* confronts the Aurochs; the second is a 1907 post card taken from Ferris State University’s Picaninny Stereotype Galleries. The University’s website explains that “picaninnies were often depicted side by side with animals.” (para. 17). The first images in the film are of *Hushpuppy* not only listening to animals but also living in squaller with them as well. Alligators are also ever present in the film, and it is noteworthy to explain to students that Black children were often referred to as “Gator Bait” to add additional context.

It is important to also illuminate that the characters from the play that the film is based on are white. Changing the race of the characters in the film confirmed hooks’ analysis of the text. During class discussion, I asked my students, why were the white characters in the play changed to Black characters in the film? According to Sharpe (2013), “*Hushpuppy* and *Wink*’s blackness in the film is necessary and not incidental... The film *needs* black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence, the violence of extreme poverty, flooding, the violence of a six-year-old girl child living alone in her own ramshackle house with no mother or father, be inspiring and not tragic? How else could it “just be” with no backstory, no explanation” (para. 7)? Instructors can reference this author in the class discussion to illustrate the importance of the racial dynamics of the characters.

Moreover, the jezebel is represented by the mother in the film. As *Wink* is nostalgically explaining to *Hushpuppy* the story of her conception, the mother is shown walking around in only her panties or slip, drinking beer. She is also depicted as being so pretty that she can boil water by simply walking by the stove. Although, throughout the film, the scenes between *Hushpuppy* and her mother are ambiguous, the audience assumes that the woman *Hushpuppy* finally visits across the water is her mother who is a cook in the brothel where *Hushpuppy* and the other little girls awkwardly dance with half dressed women. The mother/cook offers *Hushpuppy* fried alligator that she butchers and fries which is a direct reference to *Wink*’s story of her rescuing him from an Alligator wearing nothing but her underwear covered in blood before they have sex. The mother leaves shortly after *Hushpuppy* is born.

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(Google n.d.)

During the in-class discussion of the film, some additional questions we explored were:

- What did you think about the depictions of gender in the film?
- Did you think the girls in the film were in danger of sexual violence?
- What are some of the racist tropes present in the film? Did you recognize any of them?
- Who are the Beasts of the Southern Wild, drawing from the film’s title?
- What do you think the Beasts represent?
- What is the film’s central theme?

Instructors may also explain magical realism and ask students to discuss this as well.

Debriefing:

Students watched the film collectively, had a brief discussion, submitted an analytical response to hooks review during the next class period and had another guided class discussion. Students then wrote an informal reflection about the class discussion and hooks’ review to interrogate how their initial assessment of the film may have shifted after reading hooks, explaining what they learned. Questions that guided this reflection:

- Did your reading of hooks’ blog post change what you thought about the film?
- Did you notice any of the things she discussed before reading the blog post/film review?
- Are you able to apply what you have learned in this assignment to other visual texts?

Assessment:

I asked the students to resubmit the analytical response with the assignment reflection and I assessed the submissions using a holistic grading rubric. The point of submitting the assignments together and providing the assignment reflection was for both myself and the students to reflect on prior knowledge, experiences, concepts, and ideas, and gauge how the review and subsequent information and discussions transformed analysis. The rubric used to grade analytical responses for students consisted of a point system from 1 to 5, measuring organization, support, coherence, language, and mechanics.

After using this assignment in my Introduction to Literature courses for many years, I know that my students learned a great deal from the discussions of hooks’ review, and I learned a lot from them as well. This was evident in our dialogues throughout the semester when they continued to reference both hook’s review and our discussions while analyzing other texts. For many of them, this was the first time they learned about how prevailing stereotypes are present in popular culture and they questioned their acceptance and internalization of patriarchy and white supremacy. This was an introspective assignment that was also overwhelming for many students because they were faced with traumas they endured as children. Students also confronted their unchallenged acceptance of some of the most disturbing moments and stereotypical tropes in the film. Understanding their own positionality and/or subjectivity, and how it functions, while analyzing these texts was empowering for them. The knowledge they gained from hooks’ review

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and their understanding of how theory can be applicable to films and visual images in their everyday lives shifted their perspectives about the function of critical analysis and how they can use it to interpret the world around them.

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