

As Debby writes in her chapter, she was not socialized to recognize or talk about race, or even to see racism. And while this is not the experience of all White people, or all White teachers, we know from the research on White racial socialization (Hamm, 2006; Bartoli et al., 2016) that many White people are taught to ignore race, to be colorblind, to see all their students as the same. Rarely are White teachers asked—or given the opportunity—to examine their own racial background as teachers. And yet teachers’ inability to recognize their own racialized assumptions and behavior impact the classroom and their practices. The chapters in this section, we hope, will help White teachers recognize this socialization in themselves—to the extent that it is there—and see the damage that it does in a classroom with Black boys. The following vignette by Howard Stevenson demonstrates what it looks like when a White teacher is absolutely color-conscious in her teaching. Howard’s drama teacher took so seriously the task of centralizing the lives and experiences of Black students that she risked her job to do so. And in so doing, she demonstrated that teaching Black boys well doesn’t just mean changing the curriculum and reducing one’s bias, it may also mean standing up to the community, to administrators, and to other teachers who believe (maybe even unconsciously) that Black students belong on the sidelines and periphery of our communities.

Vignette: Raisins in the Sun: White Teacher as a Force of Nature Buffering the Radiation of Racial Retaliation

Howard Stevenson

White teacher. Enthusiastic in body, mind, and spirit. In the subtlest of forms, a force of nature, she was. Energetic and relentless. A thirst for justice in every bone of her theatrical body—*theater arts* to be specific. Harriet Jeglum, a name made for drama, introduced me and many of my tenth-grade teenage friends at Cape Henlopen High School to the word *thespian*. I joined as soon as I knew that *thespian* meant “serious actor.” A club. A gang. A gang of actors who could change the world, we were. She was the ringleader and a delightful one at that—one many of us were more than happy to shapeshift ourselves and follow. She brought fun and life back to education. I remember her and regret that I have taken so long to remember her in print. It has been forty years since she carried the weight of racial discord, meant for me, so I could be in the center of the pedagogy we call school.

I’ve had many white teachers over the years. Mrs. Bounds, who was wonderful in second grade and who told my mother I would be somebody special. And then there was Mrs. Rust, who submitted my fourth-grade article on sea horses to the Sussex County newspaper, putting me on blast, famous for all who dared to question my professorial talents. And who could forget Ms. Phillips, who on the first

day of geometry class called me a nigger and told me I'd never amount to anything including failing the snap-quiz she was passing out. I got a B in that class because I hated her and she hated me. There was the crush I had on both Ms. Yancy and the algebra taught in eighth and ninth grades: my favorite subject, my favorite teacher, my first favorite dream life. Still, while all my white teachers varied in their influence on my development as a student learner, one changed the ground upon which I could question learning at its core.

Few white teachers I've had in my life could fathom the seriousness of the role or the importance of exercising their professional passion as a calling. In the Fall of 1976, Ms. Jeglum decided to do something never ever done before in the history of Cape Henlopen High or lower Delaware, I daresay. Every year, the responsibility of choosing the school play fell on her.

Choosing the senior play was no small feat. In southern Delaware and in many high school theaters across this country in 1976, theater directors were beholden and even smitten by the plays of their cultural upbringing, popular cultural expression, and social whiteness of that time. Nostalgia for the good ole' days waxed heavy then, and the most common plays of record would be *Oklahoma* or *Hello, Dolly!* Musicals filled theaters with joy and happy times to distract us all from this country's political turmoil and racial woes. Unfortunately, very few parts in these plays were written with Black teenage boys in mind, except lifting things and getting shot.

The senior play was the event of the year, the character statement of the school's potential, hope, and energy. The play represented all that we as a school could be and become, and it didn't matter if you weren't in the performance. The play represented you whether you were a student, a teacher, family, or the maintenance worker. Ms. Jeglum alone could choose the play, and we had to contort ourselves into the characters of that choice and stake out multiple identity possibilities.

Needless to say, I was as shocked as any student, any teacher, any family, or maintenance worker when she chose *Raisin in the Sun*. Was I dreaming? Was she high? Was I in Delaware? *Raisin in the Sun*? Yes, oh my God, damn straight. What-the-? So many emotions and so much disagreement erupted in our school. There are only two white parts in Lorraine Hansberry's wonderful script about a Black family living in Chicago and trying to make a future for themselves, and they were the bad guys.

We all tried out for the performance. Some were happy to be stagehands. My brother Bryan won the role of Walter and was masterful. Pearlina Waples played Mama with soulful gusto. I won the role of Willie Bobo because I could whine pitifully with the best of men who lose the family's only resource for a financially

stable future. (To be honest, loud and pitifully regretful whining is universally annoying and requires no particular acting talent). You couldn't tell us *nothin'*! Not only did I not have to take a rocket ship into outer space to create a black identity from a white protagonist in the senior play, I was in it, and it was about me. I was in the center of the pedagogy. My people were in the center. My culture was in the center. Our language, our loss, our style, our anger. Protagonist didn't matter. Antagonist didn't matter. We all were heroes and heroines. We were not toting bales of cotton. We were thespians!

But, boy, the proverbial thespian shit hit the fan. Ms. Jeglum had to deal with the chorus of angry voices from White students, teachers, families, and maintenance workers about her decision. The onslaught of whiteness retaliation was her weight to carry. How could she? What was she doing? Was she high? No, she was not high. She might have been irresistible and immovable, but she was not high. Since she had arrived, Ms. Jeglum had been a social irritant in action through acting, not just words. She hadn't changed her views, stripes, or values. She didn't waste time just talking. She made school joyous again. The senior play was just the icing on the cake, the lemonade from the lemons, the tip of an iceberg I would represent for years to come.

Ms. Jeglum carried an unusually troublesome and ignoble burden. Yet, she protected us from that drama, and while compromise forced her to decide to have two senior plays that year—*Raisin in the Sun* and *Hello, Dolly!*, the racial blindness shipwreck had already taken place. There was no stopping us. We sold out the first showing so that a second show had to be scheduled. Our people, understanding the importance of this event, showed up in their Sunday best!

All students want their teachers to stand up for them, but black and brown students need them to stand up against the rejection that suggests we have no right to be in the center of the pedagogy. Not as a visitor. Not as a grateful orphan. But as the brightly shining stars we are. Like ozone protects us from the sun's radiation or a starship shields us from enemy photon torpedoes or a dam holds back the flood of racial retaliation. Placing us in the center with *Raisin* was noble enough. But buffering us from the retaliation was as honorable a gift as any teacher could give to Black and Brown students in the 1970s or the 1870s. It was more influential than a compliment or a nasty slur; more stimulating than being published or having a schoolboy crush; more powerful than talking about social justice. What white teachers need to know is that you must sacrifice your comfort if you want to be the tip of the iceberg.

A force of nature she was, we were, I am.