

**How To *Not* Kill a Mockingbird:  
Change Black Representation in the ELA Canon**

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## Abstract

Canonical texts used in ELA classrooms often support a stereotypical view of Blackness. One such work is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960). I researched peer-reviewed literature surrounding *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My findings indicated that the novel is heavily criticized for reinforcing the deficit Black narrative while supporting a White supremacist ideology. Drawing on an analysis of peer-reviewed articles, my own experience as a student and secondary education practitioner, and a review of the curriculum presented in four Pennsylvania school districts, I discovered that an exclusively deficit narrative is damaging to all students but is particularly damaging to Black students. I identify five negative consequences that can occur: a negative self-image on the part of Black students; the devaluation of Black (male) lives; the perpetuation of a distorted Eurocentric historical narrative; the enabling of anti-Blackness and the intrinsic reinforcement of White supremacy. I then examine *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the lens of criteria espoused by the “DuVernay Test” (Tucker-Smith, 2022), which assesses Black representation in the film industry and found that the novel fails on all levels while it can facilitate the negative outcomes previously identified. I counter these negative outcomes by identifying asset-framing practices utilized in Black schools and historically Black colleges and universities which can be implemented at the PK-12 levels. I conclude by encouraging educators to refrain from teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* or to approach the novel from a Black-affirming perspective.

### **How To *Not* Kill a Mockingbird: Change Black Representation in the ELA Canon**

At nine years old I saw my father, the only Black man in the nearby area, slammed against the side of our van by policemen with guns drawn. Their suspect was dark-skinned and, without first verifying the facts, the police assumed my father was their man. He was a preacher. Although I was a child, I remember holding my hands in the air and asking them not to shoot myself, my mother, or my sisters. The deaths of George Floyd, Andre Hill, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, Manuel Ellis, and hundreds of others who have been killed by police while performing ordinary activities like driving, sleeping, or walking home let me realize how fortunate I am to be alive. About three years later, I listened as a red-faced southern White classmate yelled “No one wants you here, Black boy!” several times while a White female teacher stood in the classroom’s corner, looking on yet remaining silent. At fifteen, I received my certificate of induction into the National Honor Society, not on stage beside my White peers but alone with a teacher in an empty classroom.

Throughout the years, I heard an influential White American minister who, despite his antiracist messages and positive impact on my own faith, often referred to Blacks as “kinky-headed negroes” and “colored servants” both of which are pejorative remarks that imply subservience. Most Americans will admit that racism is evil and do not consider themselves to be racist. This begs the question: what is it that drives good people to infer the inferiority of the Black race? Blacks are seen as the ensuing offspring of a sociopolitical regime that degraded us to the level of chattel existing outside the parameters of humanity (Coles, 2020). The story of Blackness is a dark, sadistic portrayal of an estimated 12.5 million victims (Mills, 2021) who were forcibly uprooted from their native soil and scattered throughout the world in a journey that would claim the lives of one out of every 12 during the Middle Passage (Mills, 2021). Over the

next four centuries these dehumanized men, women, and children would sweat rivers of blood in American cotton fields, build the White House, and construct the wall for which Wall Street is named—all at the incalculable cost of our individual lives, our liberty, and the pursuit of our own happiness.

Why?

Black bodies, as a visible state of darkness, are objects to be feared, used (Busey, 2017), and ultimately extinguished (Avery, 2020) by the light. Suchet (2004) identifies the collective shame of White aggression toward non-whites results in psychological disassociation shared by Blacks, their descendants, and Whites themselves when she writes, “We need to own our racial identity and embrace a space where the horrors of trauma can be reenacted. As whites, this necessitates an identification with the aggressor. We cannot afford to dissociate the shame and guilt we carry as a consequence of being the oppressors, historically and currently” (Suchet, 2004, p. 437). But the view of Black bodies as prey—as human property or objects capable of enduring violence and exploitation (Busey, 2017)—is not a thing of the past. It is a view that is continuously reinforced when students across the United States glance at Black characters in novels or in Eurocentric textbooks. The deficit narrative projected through literature transposes darkness, which is viewed as bad or threatening, onto Black bodies and reduces us to objects that are to be enslaved, threats to be eliminated, or victims that must be saved by someone with skin fairer than our own.

However, struggles for freedom and justice are only part of the Black story. True, fugitivity and senseless persecution comprise a large part of our history. There are whips. There are dogs. There are brutal rapes and the charred Black bodies that delighted lynchers who posed for photographs next to them (Litwack, 2009) much like a hunter poses for pictures with his kill.

We should never forget these atrocities. But Black America has displayed strength, intelligence, and resilience from the moment the Portuguese brought the first African slaves to Jamestown in 1619. These are qualities that should be emblematic in the canon of ELA literature; qualities to which all students must be exposed in culturally relevant pedagogy if Black students are truly to matter in America's classrooms and in her streets. However, these positive aspects of the Black narrative rarely enter classroom literature. In "Education as if Black Lives Mattered," Sealy-Ruiz, Haddix, and Lavache (2022) address the paucity of affirming literature. They write, "An essential design of [the] educational experience is for [Black students] to believe they are without history, that their culture is barbaric and uncivilized, and that the success of Black people is often dependent on their ability to assimilate by accepting and/or adopting European perspectives" (p. 114).

The American educational model miseducates Black students by deliberately omitting our historical contributions to American society (Williams, Coles, & Reynolds, 2020). Coles and Powell (2020) showcase both the problem inherent in the education model and its impact upon society. "Educators make arbitrary decisions on who is good and bad, which more often than not replicates the ways this distinction plays out in society at-large. Black people are seen as inherently bad people" (Coles & Powell, 2020, p. 115). Bishop (1990) proffered an enduring metaphor of windows, mirrors, and glass doors to showcase the need for children's literature that helped children experience worlds different from their own. But, while there is growth in the representation of Black culture in children's literature (Garad, 2021), what are the consequences of failing to mesh positive views of Black culture into the curriculum? Instead of offering a balanced holistic view of the Black experience, 12 years of deficit-portrayal inflicts a narrative of

inferiority on upon Black and non-Black students within the classroom which leads to enduring anti-Blackness, Black self-deprecation, and violence within American society.

### **Positionality Statement**

I am a Black man of Caribbean ancestry who has served as a secondary educator in the public and private sectors. I am also a Christian minister. I received my training in both education and ministry within the United States where racism and White supremacy appeared in various forms throughout my life. My family's story begins with a nameless woman, a slave. Animal enough to work her White master's fields by day, she was nonetheless human enough to work in his bed at night. Like many other enslaved women, she ultimately bore her master at least one child of which I am a descendant. However, my international background fostered a nuanced perspective of the racism and White supremacy I encountered in the United States while my lived experiences provided opportunities to transform negative encounters into intersubjective spaces (Suchet, 2004) that allowed me to go beyond a strict dualism of oppressor and oppressed.

My positionality did not dictate the outcomes of my research. Indeed, I initially taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) prior to 2020 without giving due consideration to the problematic impacts of the novel upon Black life. My perspective of the novel as expressed in this paper reflects personal growth that was guided by the research, my epistemological and ontological inclinations, and my observations of racial inequalities in the education system. To further balance my shifting perspective, I structured my research around peer-reviewed literature that was created by White and non-White authors. I also sought critical feedback from a diverse panel of university faculty and outside readers. Readers will also note that I have opted to capitalize the term *White* throughout the paper as I have *Black*. While not required, I have taken this small

orthographic step to visually demonstrate my ongoing commitment to the impartial handling of this vital subject with each paragraph.

### **Problem statement**

Canonical texts often used in American schools continue to support a stereotypical view of Blackness despite calls for increased diversity and representation. These anti-Black tropes have negative impacts upon Black and non-Black students. Works, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), perpetuate anti-Black tropes by presenting Blacks exclusively in a deficit manner instead of offering students a balanced view that interlaces the Black struggle with the richness of Black culture. In "Equity and Excellence in Education," Ladson-Billings (2021) advocates for a complete, hard re-set of curriculum as it pertains to Black students.

Instead, the curriculum will need to be deconstructed and re-constructed to more accurately reflect the culture of our students. The story of Black people cannot continue to be told as if it started in slavery. Instead, Black people will have to be situated in history where their African stories can be told—the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay explain ancient traditions, literatures, customs, languages, arts, science, and fully formed cultures—and interrogated (p. 73).

Achieving such a hard re-set demands a critical evaluation of the ELA canon and its representation of Black America. In this paper, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee is critically examined as an example of canonical literature that perpetuates anti-Black tropes. In addition, five negative outcomes that occur when only the deficit narrative is presented are identified.

## Overview of Black Representation and PK-12 Literature

I transitioned through four New York school districts in my PK-12 years. With the notable exception of former slave and abolitionist writer Olaudah Equiano, who was introduced by a wonderfully cynical White teacher, I encountered no literature that featured characters of African descent. But what about Dr. Charles Drew, the Black father of the modern blood bank? What of the pilot Bessie Coleman who lost her life shattering barriers to her race and gender? What of the thousands of Black American soldiers who paid the ultimate price for loyalty to America, a nation that deemed them sub-human, disproportionately arrested them in times of war (Lawlor, 2019), and even murdered them on the battlefields of France (Moyer, 2023)? These hidden figures stand tall among legions of other Black heroes who remain in the shadows, invisible only because of the color of their skin. Cridland-Hughes and King (2015) write, “In history classes, for example, school children’s first exposure to Black persons is through enslavement that features their bodies in acts of commodification, brutality, and servitude” (p. 100). With first impressions being proverbially the most important, culturally-relevant educators must dismantle a curriculum that focuses on a deficit narrative. They must reorganize curriculum around larger concepts central to the Black experience, such as identity and otherness, while questioning the value-system of a society that finds it acceptable to enslave others (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

This image of the Black victim runs inversely to the quasi-deified representations of White heroes such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson whose revolting views of Blacks as human chattel and inferior beings transcends history. A juxtaposition of Black and White representations in many PK-12 literary and historic texts clearly demonstrates that White life, White culture, and White aesthetics are desiderata while Black life is simply subpar. For

example, in their 2020 review of Baltimore City Schools' English and Social Studies curricula, the John Hopkins Institute for Education Policy found that 36 percent of secondary school texts centered around police brutality and incarceration which fails to present a well-rounded picture of the Black experience to students (Rosen, 2021). Baltimore is not an isolated case. In canonical literature and historical lessons presented to students, Blacks are often condemned to a perpetual quest for freedom from the evil slave masters, sharecropping, Jim Crow, discrimination, civil rights, the ghetto, and racially-charged scientific research—assuming, of course, that said Black life is not cut short by trigger-happy police.

Writer, scholar, and activist W.E.B. DuBois (1921) identifies the tragic result of this disparity even as he decries the fact that Black education has been framed in a White context that associates all goodness, greatness, and beauty with White people. Unconsciously, Black children come to believe that they are not likely to achieve greatness or beauty (DuBois, 1921). The Black child's automatic response is a pervasive association with failure because the myth of White supremacy is continuously reinforced by the classroom's casual disregard for the myriads of Black inventors, religious and cultural leaders, scientists, and warriors. From inventor Garrett Morgan to the thousands of Black soldiers who fought oppression abroad during two global wars, Black contributions to humanity have saved countless lives and have directly contributed to the preservation of the United States. All this despite once being the most exploited component of the capitalist labor force (Trotter, 2019).

While disappointing, the fact that Black heroes are either largely absent from classroom bookshelves or are not actively integrated into the curriculum is not surprising given that racism is an endemic aspect of American life (Busey, 2017). In a touching self-analysis of her own struggle with White fragility written for the *International Journal of Multidisciplinary*

Perspectives in Higher Education, educator Brkich (2021) cites a disturbing reality for educators who go beyond tangential inclusion to actively teaching in a manner that dismantles Whiteness. “Challenging other white people—be they family, friends, professional colleagues, or students—poses the very real risk of damaging those relationships, possibly irreparably” (Brkich, 2021, p. 180). By contrast, canonical literature such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which “extends stereotypes and oppression rather than ameliorating them” (Wheeler et al., 2021, p. 8), is centered in classroom instruction. This dichotomy necessitates an examination of the role American classrooms play in perpetuating anti-Black racism within society.

In districts across the United States stakeholders are holding intense debates as to what books are appropriate for the classroom (Spector, 2023). Recent legislation banning or limiting schools from teaching that racism is infused in American institutions is causing teachers to self-censor their instruction (Fortin & Heyward, 2022). The representation of non-White bodies in literature has been at the core of national dialogue following the brutal murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and a tragically long list of others. The truth is that, irrespective of public opinion, educators are the frontline decision-makers as to who is—and who is not—represented on their classroom shelves. The content of those shelves is shaped by the educator’s individual biases (Everett, 2019). How an educator looks, votes, and perceives others directly impacts the contents of a classroom library or curriculum. But what if *my* story is one that threatens an educator’s personal view of the natural social order? Does it not still deserve to be heard? Now is the time for all educators, regardless of race or ethnicity, to critically analyze their bookshelves and point all students to the countless Black heroes who have shaped our world.

### **Pedagogical Literature Review**

Previous literature indicates that counter storytelling may increase the empathy of the hearers (Delgado, 2000). But empathy does not alter perceptions of inferiority. In fact, White people, but not always people of color, respond less empathetically when pain is introduced to a nonwhite body, particularly when that body is more common shades of brown and black (Harrelson, 2021). Educators therefore need to actively present material that confronts prejudice at the deepest levels. An effective means of achieving this lofty goal is to present Black heroes in authentic literature *more often* than Black victims. We must go beyond counter storytelling to “hero amplification” if we wish to disrupt the myth of Black inferiority. For the purposes of this analysis, I define a Black hero as an individual whose positive contributions to humanity or Black America are undeniable, irrespective of that individual’s personal life choices. To facilitate concise discussion, the masculine pronoun is used in this paper irrespective of the individual’s gender identity.

While institutionalized slavery has been abolished in the United States, it has born a child that thrives within American society—anti-Black racism (Coles, 2020). Anti-Blackness is the socially-constructed view of Black bodies as disposable or otherwise problematic (Warren and Coles, 2020) which. Research on anti-Blackness demonstrates that the marginalization of Black perspectives is an expression of endemic anti-Blackness in schools and society at-large (Dumas & ross, 2016; Coles, 2019; Warren & Coles, 2020; Garad, 2021). This marginalization appears in the standardized curriculum via the underrepresentation and limited portrayals of powerful Black characters in children’s literature (Garad, 2021). In failing to disrupt the curriculum and counter the deficit narrative by affirming Black brilliance, American PK-12 literature is a direct contributor to the systematic marginalization of Black lives. As America grapples with inequities

within and without the system of education (Williams & Toldson, 2020), it is essential that we cast a critical eye upon the lack of Black heroes presented to students.

Showcasing hidden Black heroes continuously is essential as the majority of students experience Black history for only one month per academic year (Walker & Russell, 2020). It is anti-Blackness that leads to curriculum which focuses on a deficit narrative and negatively impacts students across the PK-12 spectrum in a form of malpractice (Parker, 2020). This disregard for Black heroes within the classroom spills over into a society where police, mental health workers (Kugelmass, 2016), the media (Jean et al., 2022), and White supremacists (Howard, 2016) marginalize Black lives.

### **Gap in the Literature**

While existing scholarship has often examined the educational experiences and academic outcomes of Black students in American schools and recent literature also identifies promising literary practices for Black students there is a paucity of research examining the negative outcomes of canonical ELA literature that perpetuates anti-Black tropes such as the view of the “Black victim” without paying full and due respect to the “Black hero.” When Black characters *are* presented in a heroic light, too often it is a paper-thin, socially approved caricature of an individual instead of multi-dimensional humans (Tosolt, 2019) whose internal and external conflicts are placed within the confines of an authentic historical context that resonates with students.

This paper purposes to critically examine *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) as well as identify negative ontological outcomes are fostered by teaching literature that exclusively presents Blacks as victims. To better inform praxis, this paper also contrasts the deficit approach by identifying several ontological benefits of teaching Black asset-framing content. It also

provides an epistemological framework by which educators can critically evaluate their classroom literature in hopes of offering all students a richer, balanced portrayal of the Black story. For it is story that changes hearts and, ultimately, the world.

Coles (2020) defines storywork as the “individual or collective stories, which emerge from the lived experiences of Black people and communities that uses Black knowledge/s as a tool to extend and author oneself beyond the conditions of anti-Blackness” (Coles, 2020, p. 4). Somewhere in the desert of Black storywork that characterized my education, I realized that I was called to change the narrative—to carve out a place for myself in a White majoritarian culture where I always felt like an imposter due to the color of my skin and the fact that I encountered no people of color in positions of authority. I would begin by doing what others thought impossible. At 14, I informed my White guidance counselor that I planned to graduate early. He laughed in my face. But, despite facing homelessness and other challenges, I did indeed graduate high school at 16 years old with honors. I earned two scholarships, graduated university with two Bachelor of Arts degrees at 19 years old while working two jobs, and ultimately began a successful career as an educator. My story mirrors that of my race—it is a balance of tragedy *and* triumph. Though my story begins with slavery, it moves on to spotlight Black possibility. To focus on one aspect without the other is to rob me of a whole, complete existence. The same is true for millions of other Blacks who have countered the Black deficit narrative by their courage, faith, and sacrifice. We have suffered but we have also triumphed. Let our entire story be told.

### **Anti-Blackness in American Education**

American educational institutions have long been bastions of racism and bigotry. In “Social Studies Research and Practice,” Walker and Russell (2020) write that “traditional

elementary social studies textbooks of the early 1900s often depicted Blacks as lazy, unruly savages incapable of achieving any form of success” (Walker & Russell, 2020 p. 128). In the modern era, Love identifies American schools as a place where Black children are “humiliated, reduced, and destroyed by visceral and explicit attacks” (Love, 2016 p. 2). Our classrooms are a microcosm of larger social ills such as racial inequities (Williams & Toldson, 2020), the achievement gap, and even the overwhelmingly racially homogenous nature of the American teacher workforce. Coles (2020) underscores the fact that schools cannot be race neutral institutions, because their students—and I would add their faculty, staff, administrators, and key stakeholders— do not live race neutral lives (Coles, 2020). As children are born into a society that is highly racialized, it is impossible for them to remain oblivious to the social behaviors that are inherently unique to differences in skin tone and genetic features (Johnson, 2022).

This racialization is nothing new; it formed a core part of American ideology from the nation’s inception. Even prior to gaining independence, the American colonies formed a society based on racial hierarchy which has existed concurrently with normative racism or anti-Blackness (Tosolt, 2019). This persistent exclusion remains. Aside from a few, curated individuals who are often painted in monochrome strokes that focus on their battle with racism instead of the vivid relief and color of fully realized lives, students in American classrooms rarely encounter Black heroes. A cursory glance at the history of Black education in America can leave no doubt that it is a system rooted in oppression (Gibson et al., 2022). The ongoing exclusion of Black heroes is nothing short of anti-Black behavior (Warren, 2022) that supports self-serving White interests (Haynes, 2023).

After the 1783 Treaty of Paris recognized American independence, the former colonies were ready to stretch their wings. But the Black blood that was spilled to win American freedom

was not enough to wipe out the stain of slavery. In fact, racializing identities and racially subjugating Blacks and Native Americans offered ambitious White settlers an ideological foundation for slavery and conquest (Harris, 1993). The deficit narrative, or inferiority of non-Whites, was used to justify colonization and racial subordination while the assets of these ancient civilizations were ignored or seen as threats. Children born in the ex-colonies were primed to fulfill America's "Manifest Destiny," a task which involved the brutal subjugation of the non-White indigenous population. But land is only valuable if it produces profit, thus necessitating forced labor such as was provided by the Transatlantic Slave Trade. White settler colonialism justified the genocide of native peoples while slavery anchored capitalism as a core aspect of American life (Smith, 2012). Slaves were, in a literal sense, human capital who could "appreciate" with sexual maturity or "depreciate" due to illness, disobedience, and other negative factors (Rosenthal, 2018).

Despite the inherent danger and deprivation of their human rights, Patel (2019) details how enslaved people received education in secrecy, quietly transmuting cultural and political knowledge through generations. This capitalistic view of equating bodies with wealth acquisition, and exercising systematic control of these bodies, framed America's education system and resulted in an entrepreneurial model of educational leadership (Rigby, 2014; Warren, 2022) which punished those who deviate from its Eurocentric ideals such as privileging Whiteness. Antiliteracy laws, inflicted upon enslaved Blacks, gave way to an educational "Jubilee" in the postbellum South in which Blacks took advantage of the opportunity for education despite ongoing violence committed by Whites (Givens, 2022).

One persistent ideal is meritocracy which, at heart, is a myth of socioeconomic conquest that is markedly similar to the myth of Manifest Destiny. Just as White supremacist ideals once

established norms for a society bent on pursuing Manifest Destiny—norms which supported the genocide of non-White lives and, in conformity with capitalism, limited the value of Black lives to a numerical system of straight-line depreciation (Rosenthal, 2018)—so today the White gaze establishes ideologies that, in conformity with anti-Black rhetoric, establish or maintain academic and social norms which trivialize Black brilliance and reduce Blacks to victims whose devalued existences have limited place on classroom bookshelves. Once the deficit narrative was used to justify colonization and slavery. Now, *perpetuating* the deficit narrative nourishes the child of slavery which is anti-Black racism.

Anti-Black racism is nourished in America's classrooms. Historically, this began at the earliest years of education. For example, during the Cold War, as America sought to compete with the Soviet Union, publishers accelerated the production of books for children (Pinkerton, 2016). These books rarely featured characters who were Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). When they did, BIPOC characters were continuously presented in an inferior light (Bishop, 2011) which reflected socially accepted prejudices of the time. Elementary students therefore received an onslaught of literature that promoted Whiteness—an unfortunate trend that continues today (Tschida et al., 2014). For Black students, this message inherently casts a negative view of their own beauty and goodness. To combat this mindset, Walker and Russell (2020) advocate for Black elementary students to engage with texts that allow them to acquire a cultural history that features Black triumphs as well as struggles. These texts should draw on the richness of African culture prior to the diaspora, including the rise of African empires, to foster a rich understanding of Black identity and strength. This provides a more complete knowledge of history, encourages a positive sense of self-worth, and can contribute to Black student success (Walker & Russell, 2020).

A wealth of literature supports the understanding that our current system of education fails Black students. Rall and Hallman (2021) note that schools often only value family engagement and behavioral norms that reflect White, middle-class behavior which denigrates the perspectives of students of color. Warren (2021) references the growing body of scholarship which cites anti-Blackness in PK-12 education as a prime contributor to Black youth's present-day suffering while Givens (2021) argues that Black education remains an exercise in fugitivity or the covert pursuit of empowering knowledge as a means to liberation. Val Brown writes, "Whiteness is supreme over others. We see that present in our values as a nation, in our culture, in our ways of being, and, therefore, embedded in all our systems" (Brown, 2021, p. 29). By this standard, one cannot help but wonder how many of America's elementary teachers are, perhaps unwittingly, advocating racist ideologies. One can be part of a racist system without being racist (Oluo, 2019). Indeed, race as a biological fact is a fallacy (DiAngelo, 2018; Love, 2019) that served to support slavery and ignorance yet Black students are faced with educational experiences that have been shaped by a history of racial discrimination designed to perpetuate the fallacy of Black intellectual inferiority (Coles & Reynolds, 2020).

Initial versions of literature created for Black children prior to Emancipation attempted to balance advocating for submission to slavery with calls for a version of freedom that did not hinge upon the violence of revolution (Weikle-Mills, 2017). On the heels of slavery came sharecropping and the segregation of the Jim and Jane Crow laws that preceded murderous terror, limited mass achievement through unequal educational resources (Graff, 2011) and cemented the image of the ignorant Black. Nazi Germany imitated America's codified system of racial segregation (Floyd-Thomas, 2014) which was so austere that it garnered the praise of none less than Adolf Hitler (Whitman & Model, 2017). Traditional American elementary social

studies textbooks at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caricatured Blacks as indolent, unruly barbarians who were incapable of success (Walker & Russell, 2020) in ways disturbingly similar to that of Germany whose hatred of Blacks stemmed from the Rhineland's post-World War 1 occupation by Black French colonial troops.

While the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* called for desegregation with "all deliberate speed" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), staunch segregationists devised deliberate strategies to limit or circumvent this mandate (Williams & Toldson, 2020). More than a half-century later, the curriculum in PK-12 education *remains* centered around the stories of the racial majority (Brown & Au, 2014) which elevates Whiteness and White ways of knowing while solely presenting Blacks as victims and denying a positionality that centers Black achievement. This ethnocentric academic narcissism reduces the greatness of Black lives to an afterthought and reflects the deep-set racist hegemony of schools.

Black storywork is a sociopolitical development that has emerged as a direct means of combatting society's refusal to accept our humanity. It demonstrates our worthiness of "regard, recognition, and resources" (Dumas, 2016, p. 8). However, in a society where Whiteness is constructed in opposition to Blackness, there is no distinction between Whiteness and *anti-Blackness* (Tosolt, 2019). "The explicit positioning of Whiteness combined with the explicit invisibility of Blackness serves to support the conditioning of all students into White supremacy and to reinforce the psychology and behaviors of White fragility" (Tosolt, 2019, p. 775). The classroom therefore is the place where the majoritarian view of Blacks will be shaped. And the primary tool that will shape White minds is the manner in which Blacks are portrayed through story.

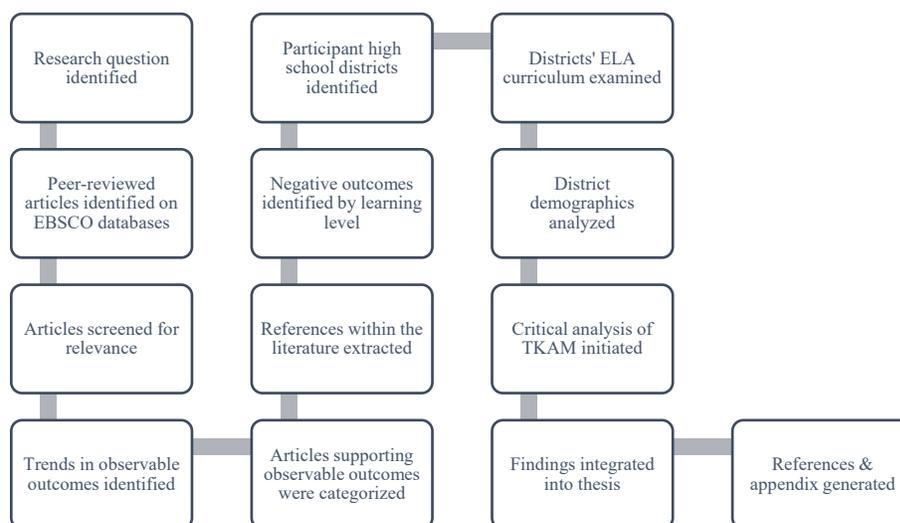
**Methodology:**

My research was broken into three parts: a review of existing pedagogical research focused on trends in teaching multicultural, diverse concepts, an analysis of Black representation in the secondary literary curriculum of four Pennsylvania school, and a review of Black-affirming trends in education. My goal was to identify negative outcomes of portraying Blacks as victims in cornerstone literature such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and identify tools that can equip educators who wish to pursue abolitionist teaching—or teaching that refuses to perpetuate the oppression of students of color (Love, 2019)—with a framework by which they can critically evaluate their classroom bookshelves. As this paper is primarily a review of literature and publicly accessible information, no informed consent was necessary. For purposes of simplicity, the scope of this study was limited to the presentation of Blacks in the English/Literature and History curricula, and the presentation of Blacks in visual media.

My review of the literature began with a search on the EBSCO databases for peer-reviewed articles using keywords such as narrative in education, counternarratives in education, asset-framing, etc. I accumulated a total of 60 articles. Five of these were discarded for lack of direct relevance. The remainder were organized into four categories that correlated to the main theme presented. The categories were: Supporting White Supremacist Ideology, Successful Approaches for Improving Black Academic Achievement (SAIBAA), Reinforcement of Systemic Racism, and Reinforcement of Negative Self-Image. Articles were initially categorized based upon the title and abstract. After reading the articles and gaining an understanding of their content, I adjusted the categorization as necessary.

As I analyzed each article, I logged any negative impacts identified by the author as well as the data that supported the author's conclusions. I then condensed the negative outcomes

identified into five main subcategories. These subcategories include: a negative self-image on the part of Black students; the devaluation of Black (male) lives; the perpetuation of a distorted Eurocentric historical narrative; enabling anti-Blackness and the reinforcement of White Supremacy. While reviewing each article I noted segments that were pertinent to the research question and organized them by the colors yellow and green. Yellow signified information that was to be quoted in the research project while green signified contextual information more suitable for reference.



*Figure 1: Visual overview of process*

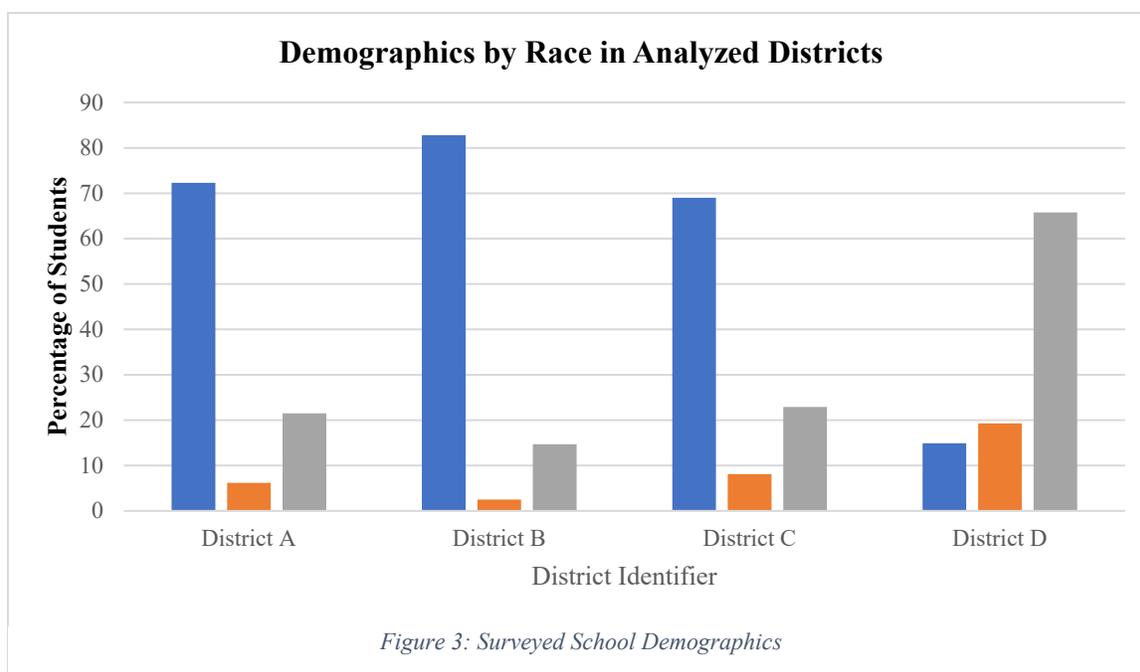
In addition to the literature review, I conducted an analysis of the curriculum of four secondary schools in Pennsylvania. My process included identifying the schools, then researching their public-facing ELA curriculum for novels that featured Black characters. These outcomes were then applied to the canonical work, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), which formed part of the curriculum in all schools I analyzed. Five districts were initially identified for curriculum research however one was discarded due to my inability to obtain public information about the novels covered in its secondary education English/Literature courses. The remaining

four districts were selected due to my familiarity with the region, their curriculum, and district demographics. This familiarity was developed by my work as a practitioner, my service to various communities within the region, and my involvement as a parent. For privacy purposes, the districts are referred to as Districts A, B, C, and D.



*Figure 2: Overview of novel Process*

Public information on the demographics of each district's high school(s) reveal that three of the four have a strong White majority student population. At all of the examined high schools, Black students represent a very small segment of the student population. While the demographic trends are consistent throughout the entire district, I have focused only on high school data given that the curriculum content analyzed is exclusive to the secondary level. The following chart relays the racial demographics of each district's high school as of the time of writing. Black and



White student populations are spotlighted. As this paper concentrates on Black/White interactions, other races—including students who identify as mixed-race—are displayed in one category (Other Minority Groups) for reference purposes. Future study would benefit from exploring the challenges in literature representation by other minority groups.

While the student populations of each district varied, the racial composition of each high school was overwhelmingly White with the exception of District D. With the districts identified, I explored the publicly available curriculum in English and reading classes at the secondary level while focusing on novels that spotlight Black characters. Establishing Blackness in education as a normal aspect of literature requires as many books in classroom bookshelves about Africans and their descendants as there are about Europeans and Americans (Muller et al., 2022). Only two novels featuring minority characters were included in the curriculum of these four districts between grades 8-12. Out of the two, only one novel was built around a Black character: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was also the singular novel that is taught in all four districts which is not surprising given its status in the canon of American literature.

I therefore chose to critically examine *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) in terms of its presentation of Blacks and in the context of the negative outcomes already identified from a review of the literature. To assist in maintaining objectivity, I critique the novel from the standpoint of the DuVernay test (Dargis, 2016) which was created to reduce perceived bias in the film industry. Inspired by the Bechdel test (Tucker-Smith, 2022), which critiques the portrayal of women in the film industry (Buelvas-Baldiris & Rubira-Garcia, 2023), the DuVernay test was developed amid the racial controversy surrounding the 2016 Oscar nominees that sparked the #OscarsSoWhite social media storm. Teresa Hagan (2022) writes, “As a filmmaker and activist,

DuVernay uses her work to grapple with the racial histories, philosophies and ideologies which have permeated American history and society – but also to expose how these persist, in a granular way, in the present-day lives of Black Americans” (p. 44). Given the test’s emphasis upon fully realized individuals, the DuVernay Test is a useful tool to assess Black representation in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It asks five critical questions that must be answered affirmatively for the characters to pass. In a guest article written for *The Toronto Star*, Tucker-Smith (2022), author and former faculty member of John Hopkins University School of Education, writes,

The [DuVernay] test asks five key questions: Are the characters of colour whitewashed? Do the characters of colour pursue their own goals, separate from the white characters? Do the characters of colour only talk about their race? Do the characters fulfill harmful, simplistic, or downright racist stereotypes? Finally, is the director, writer, or creator representative of the story’s culture? (p. 3)

Guided by these questions, I examine areas in which *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) fails the test and serves to perpetuate anti-Black tropes. I then examine the consequences in a discussion on the negative outcomes for students previously identified by a review of existing pedagogical literature. For quick reference, those outcomes are again stated here. My review of the literature identified the following negative outcomes in association with presenting Blacks as victims:

1. Negative self-image on the part of Black students
2. The devaluation of Black (male) lives
3. Perpetuating a distorted, Eurocentric historical narrative
4. Enabling anti-Blackness
5. The reinforcement of White superiority

It is important to note that, while students may manifest anti-Blackness at any stage in the academic pipeline the literature suggests that anti-Blackness and a curriculum centered in Whiteness is persistent throughout the entire PK-12 journey. These outcomes are recurring themes that challenge Black students throughout their academic journey and, indeed, throughout their lives.

### **The DuVernay framework and *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Failing to critically interrogate textbooks that remove select racial histories serves to substantiate oppression (Brown & Brown, 2015). The same can be said of novels that present Black lives in an incomplete manner by focusing on the deficit narrative instead of offering a balanced view that centers the richness of the Black experience. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is a much-beloved novel by Harper Lee that has garnered five decades of both praise. In 2018, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was voted “America’s best loved novel” (PBS, 2018) and found a place in the 2010 Common Core Standards. It is therefore not surprising that it would be included in the curriculum of multiple school districts in Pennsylvania, particularly districts whose students are majority White. However, when viewed against DuVernay’s framework, it becomes clear that Lee’s novel fails both the test and students of all races. In fact, *Mockingbird* (1960) reinforces a tolerance that does not allow for equality (Kaye, 2020).

The first criterion of the DuVernay Test (Dargis, 2016) assesses whether the Black characters have an identity that *affirms* a Black identity. While Tom Robinson and Calpurnia, *Mockingbird’s* (1960) two principal Black characters are named, they are both presented in ways that center Whiteness. In fact, the one-dimensional presentation of the characters reduces White supremacy to an issue of morality instead of a social construct that is entrenched in American society. This oversimplification extends racial oppression and reinforce negative stereotypes

(Wheeler et al., 2021). Students finish the novel having encountered nothing about Black life other than the blatant lie that Blacks in Alabama were impoverished, illiterate individuals who suffered under an isolated racist community. This fallacy stands in direct opposition to the fact that many Blacks in the deep South were literate at the time (Kaye, 2020) and the suffering of Blacks was not an isolated event but a persistent evil that infected American society as a whole.

But *Mockingbird* (1960) also fails DuVernay's second criterion (Dargis, 2016) in that *neither* Black character maintains extensive conversations apart from issues related to race or social prejudice. Lee portrays a Black America in which characters do nothing but bemoan the racist system which limits their life. But in the real world, thousands of Black lawyers, physicians, and successful entrepreneurs were shattering boundaries at the time. While Lee's story is obviously fiction, it is presented as *historical* fiction and draws on very real issues that were in the minds of the public at the time the novel was written and during the following decades.

In 1935, the US Supreme Court overturned the conviction of one of the Scottsboro Boys, who were nine young men falsely convicted of raping two young White women. This story appears to be a historical model for Lee's fictitious Tom Robinson (Kaye, 2020). But Lee diverges grossly from history as she creates images of Blacks in the minds of readers. Though her story is set in the 1930s, Lee presents a world in which Blacks are illiterate when the real trial of the Scottsboro boys proved that there were numerous Black citizens who were qualified to serve on a jury (Kaye, 2020) and who led successful multidimensional lives despite racial discrimination. In Lee's world, only a handful of Blacks in the entire town can read when less than 20 percent of Blacks over ten years old in the South were illiterate at the time (Kaye, 2020). This glaring discrepancy begs the question why Harper Lee would so grossly misrepresent the

truth about the Black community. Lee simply does not *wish* to portray a true picture of Blacks in the South. To do so would be to confront the deeply ingrained bias that is reflected in her monolithic, inaccurate, portrayal of Blacks.

Third, the DuVernay test (Dargis, 2016) calls for individual Black ambition. But no Black character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) pursues goals apart from White interests. In the text, Blacks are portrayed as being incapable of planning for the future or pursuing long-term goals at all. Scout relays Maycomb's reaction to the death of Tom Robinson by stating: "Tom's death was typical. Typical of a nigger to cut and run. Typical of a nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just run blind first chance he saw" (Lee, 1960, p. 322). While one can argue that this sentiment is expressed by the racist community and not the novel's protagonists, this opinion is never refuted or, better still, proven to be wrong *by* the novel's protagonists. Instead, Lee uses the prejudiced Maycomb's voice to express the dark opinion that lurks in her own heart—victimized Blacks are incapable of shaping their own destiny or even imagining the possibility of having one.

Fourth, racist stereotypes persist throughout the novel despite its veneer of tolerance (Wheeler et al., 2021). Blacks exist solely to occupy subservient roles. In a typical trope of the "Mammy" portrayal of Black women, Calpurnia works for the Finches as a housekeeper and pseudo-mother to Scout; Tom Robinson can only perform menial labor. Calpurnia reinforces anti-Black sentiment in that she has no agency beyond serving the Finches. Her opinions on political or social matters are non-existent when she should be a valid link between the Finch family and the Black community. Calpurnia could have been used to disrupt pejorative views of Blacks and women. But both Calpurnia and Tom Robinson find employment through their interactions with the White community. Here *Mockingbird* (1960) reinforces the blatant

stereotype that Blacks need Whites to act as their benevolent saviors which is a tired racist trope (Wheeler et al., 2021) that is reinforced each academic year in classrooms across America as students read this novel.

The final tenet of the DuVernay test (Dargis, 2016) calls for cultural authenticity on the part of the author and characters. But *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was authored by a White middle-class woman whose knowledge of Black life was, at best, limited or, at worst, non-existent. Nowhere do we gain access to the *Black* perspective of Maycomb's racial climate. Black voices are silent. Black collective wisdom is ignored. As Yoo (2019) expresses about Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (1976), historical fiction from a marginalized perspective "undoes dehumanizing and negative stereotypical assumptions of African Americans that are deeply ingrained in White society and culture" (p. 334). But Lee does not use historical fiction to this end. With careful research for realism purposes, cultural authenticity might have been achieved in *Mockingbird* (1960) by showing intimate details of Tom Robinson's family, by showcasing the strengths and weaknesses of the Black community, and by having Scout or Jem actively contradict the stereotypical views of the White community with their own observations of Black life. Respect for Black traditions could have been smoothly woven into the text. Black perspectives on the ongoing trial and its outcome should be presented to the reader through encounters with the Black community or, at least through Calpurnia who works for the Finches and is perfectly placed to convey the opinions of the Black community to Scout and Jem.

By contrast, we are inundated with trite adages from Atticus Finch who is depicted as the fountain of wisdom, despite his opposition to desegregation as expressed in *Go, Set a Watchman* (2015). Kakutani (2015), in a review of *Go, Set a Watchman* (2015) for the *New York Times* highlights the blatant bigotry in writing, "Atticus is a racist who once attended a Klan meeting,

who says things like ‘The Negroes down here are still in their childhood as a people (Lee, 2015, p.246).’” Or asks his daughter: ‘Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world’ (Lee, 2015, p. 246)?”

Although Scout the character becomes disillusioned with her father in *Watchman* (2015), Harper Lee, despite knowing Atticus’s inner bigotry that will be revealed, still chooses to present Atticus as a wise individual in *Mockingbird* (1960). For Lee, at the time of writing *Mockingbird* (1960), wise people clearly support segregation. It is ironic in the extreme that this wise lawyer does not suggest that the alleged rape victim undergo a medical doctor’s examination when defending a client who is on trial for his life in *Mockingbird* (Kaye, 2020). *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) gives a clear “misalignment between American ideals and the lived experience of African Americans” (Wheeler et al., 2021, p. 2). If this is indeed America’s most-loved novel, is it any wonder that Blacks are routinely murdered in America’s streets by a system that legitimizes their deaths?

A closer look at *Mockingbird* (1960) reveals an insidious pattern that transcends the classroom and spills out into American society. Avery (2020) delineates this process as constituting four stages. In literature, Black bodies are first dehumanized, then murdered, blamed for their own demise, and are finally overwritten by a majoritarian narrative that eradicates the violence of their death (Avery, 2020). Each of these stages is prominent in Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

### **Stage 1: Blacks are dehumanized**

The primary Black victim, Tom Robinson, is dehumanized when he is equated with the dog, Tim Johnson. Despite carrying a human name that is deliberately similar to that of his

human counterpart, Tim Johnson is, in fact, a rabid dog. Like Tom, the dog has a disability. Like Tom, the dog is surrounded by hateful White citizens who see the dog as a threat. Similar to Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo, who is compared to a dog upon his death (Achebe, 2006), both Tim Johnson and Tom Robinson are fated to die prematurely.

### **Stage 2: Blacks are murdered**

While it may be argued that the dog represents a town infected by racism (Jones, 2010), the comparison does not follow through. For, while Atticus kills Tim Johnson, he certainly does *not* kill Maycomb's racism. In fact, Lee alludes to Tom Robinson's plight, and foreshadows his death, in that Tim Johnson is ultimately killed because of the disease in part, due to Atticus's inability to defend him from an unjust institution. The racism that led to Tom's imprisonment is shown by the town's casual dismissal of Tom's death. "Typical of a nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just run blind first chance he saw" (Lee, 1960, p. 322). Maycomb's racism survives Lee's novel; like the dog Tim Johnson, Black Tom Robinson does not.

### **Stage 3: Blacks are blamed**

Similar to George Floyd and many others, Tom's death is a result of excess of police brutality. Seventeen bullets in the back end Tom's life. But the murder isn't allotted to the guards. True to form, Tom is blamed for his own death. Maycomb considers him an idiot who threw his life away in a reckless manner typical of "niggers." Only Atticus, who shares the author's racist belief in a benevolent White patriarchy (Kaye, 2020), can see things differently. But recognizing racism exists does nothing to save lives.

### **Stage 4: Black voices are silenced**

Finally, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) presents Tom's death through the lens of the dominant narrative. A White man has the last word. We are not with Tom when he dies. We do not witness the guards' barbarism first-hand. We do not hear the screams of his Black wife, Helen, as she learns of her husband's murder. Nor do we hear Tom's children sobbing, as they wander aimlessly, looking in vain with tear-filled eyes for a father who will never come home again. Instead, the reader is given an impersonal statement of fact from the lips of a White man. It is through Atticus, who is part of the dominant culture that caused Tom's death, that we learn the details of this climatic moment. And thus, the four stages identified by Avery (2020) tragically culminate in a novel that has influenced the way White American students see Blacks for more than a generation. Counter-storytelling advocates for the authentic illumination of voices that are often misrepresented or silenced (Husband & Kang, 2020). If the stories of Black characters are heard only through White voices, is it any wonder that the potential contained within the Black story is not heard by those who listen?

The secondary students in the four examined districts in Pennsylvania are exposed to only *one* novel surrounding a Black character. It is not a story that counters the dominant narrative; it is one that reinforces it. This novel is one that fails the DuVernay test (Tucker-Smith, 2022) *and* manifests every stage off a horrific pattern that is emblematic to stereotypical portrayals of Black lives. The fact that *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) has won the Pulitzer's prize and influenced students by the millions is nothing short of chilling. Students are presented with a clear message that fits the pattern Avery (2020) exposes: a Black life must be brutally extinguished while a White man is glorified for a story to be successful. Disrupting this sadistic narrative requires novels written by authors of color that present students with multidimensional, unique perspectives that challenge White supremacy (Wheeler et al., 2021) and offer asset-

framing perspectives of Black lives. Rall and Hollman insist that discussing *both* the negative consequences of racialization and affirming positive Black cultural strengths are necessary for Black students to succeed as a racial minority (Rall & Holman, 2021). To relay the implications of racialization without the balance of affirming Black brilliance is to commit spirit-murder (Love, 2019). And murder is a crime that cannot be undone.

### **Negative outcomes of the deficit narrative**

My research identified five primary negative outcomes that stem from exclusively presenting Blacks as victims as is the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). In the following segment, I detail these findings as well as how they may be countered by presenting Black lives in an asset-framing, heroic light.

### **Negative self-image on the part of Black Students**

Black children are unique in that they are consistently bombarded with negative images in various forms of media that damage their souls (Boutte et al., 2017). Blacks identify with the negative messages presented in stereotypical media portrayals (Adams-Bass et al., 2014) which affects their self-image, their view of what constitutes socially accepted behaviors for minority groups (Adams & Stevenson, 2012), and how members of their racial/ethnic group are seen by others (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2017). The pervasive messages of media are internalized and shape the behavior patterns of Black youth (Jean et al., 2022) with television exposure predicting a decrease in self-esteem for Black boys, Black girls, and White girls (Tucker-Smith, 2022). For Black women, stereotypical portrayals of their race and gender impact their self-esteem (Stanton et al., 2017) and increase the likelihood of substance abuse and high-risk sexual behavior (Jean et al., 2022). The misrepresentations of Black people, or “controlling images” (Collins, 2000) often portray Black men as mindless brutes with a penchant for violence

(Anyiwo et al., 2021) and shape perceptions held by Black youth about their identity and ability to succeed in a heavily racialized nation.

I have held a ministerial role for more than 13 years. Recently, my wife and I counselled a middle-aged Black woman who shared that, as a teen, she struggled with wanting to be White because being Black was ugly. My parishioner is by no means alone. This perception was shaped by media and social images which either reinforce or disrupt social hierarchies (Aniwoyo et al., 2021). It is definitively reinforced by Harper Lee. None of the Blacks in the novel are successful, meet happy ends, or are in any way a person to be envied. For Lee, to be Black is to have an ugly life.

I cannot definitively say how Tom Robinson or Calpurnia feel about being Black as the novel gives precious little insight into the Black perspective. So, I turn to a novel that has won a Nobel Prize for Literature and was written by Black author, Toni Morrison. Like Percola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Black youth often wish they were of a different race to avoid the barriers to success that plague their upward mobility or escape the multigenerational misery of their circumstances. However, when Black students are intentionally exposed to Black scholars and successful individuals, the result is a transformative experience that establishes pride in their racial identity (Anyiwo et al., 2021).

Many arguments have been made identifying visual media as a form of text (Grama, 2022). The inverse is also true. As a form of media, text has tremendous ability to impact lives. While negative portrayals of Blacks in media inflict damage upon Black souls, literature by Black authors has often been a refuge of possibility that contains rich portrayals of Black life (Garad, 2021) and deepens Black understanding of cultural values and epistemologies (Bishop, 2011). Literature must be regarded as a form of media that either reinforces social stereotypes or

disrupts a narrative of oppression and affirms Black self-image. While teaching deficit-framing literature can foster a negative self-image on the part of Black students, teaching literature that balances the challenges of the past with the possibility of a bright future offers Black students a means of self-affirmation and encourages them to explore the breadth of possibility that is exclusive to their identity (Warren, 2021). Instead of subtly encouraging students to “be White” by portraying White characters who are to be envied, educators should use their unique social positioning to convey the understanding that Blackness lacks nothing (Woodson, 2021) in respect to Whiteness.

Education for the Black community in America was initially viewed as an escape (Givens, 2021), and as a means of sparking radical imagination about the future of Black students (Warren, 2021). But the dream of a radically transformative education quickly degenerates into a nightmare when the deficit narrative alone is presented. However, positive self-awareness, nurtured by a pedagogy of Black history that chronicles the full gamut of the trials and achievements surrounding Black individuals, stimulates the ability to make positive life choices (Cavaliere & Wilcox, 2022) as well as the drive to achieve.

In short, Black students can rid themselves of the desire to find affirmation through White assimilation and will be better positioned to exist without regard for the White gaze (Warren, 2021) when continuously exposed to Black heroes. Indeed, nurturing an ethos of possibility opens the portal to success through which a motivated Black student may well become yet another Black world-shaper.

### **The devaluation of Black (male) lives**

I often reflect on the moment I saw my dad slammed against our vehicle with his hands behind his back as the police wrongfully assumed they had found their man. As a child, the only

emotion I felt was fear. But the passing of time brought another emotion—a deep sadness that stems from the realization that my life will never be as valuable as others. At least in the eyes of some. The devaluation of Black lives—in particular Black *male* lives—is a viciously persistent theme in both literature and the real world. Most White readers and moviegoers, unless informed otherwise, will automatically assume that a character is White (Avery, 2020). Why should a character be anything other than a White, particularly if this character is successful? In presenting an Afropessimist view that reduces Black lives—primarily Black *male* lives—to expendable commodities via their literature curriculum, educators are enabling classrooms that may spawn still more badge-toting perpetrators of violence like Derek Chauvin. By contrast, critical analysis of multicultural novels with themes of race can help students grow into adults who view race-motivated violence, such as the 2022 shooting in Buffalo, New York, as the legacy of an oppressive system that must be disrupted (Kuehl, 2022). Blacks are struggling to build a castle on a foundation that is historically entrenched in shame that Morrison considered contagious (Morrison, 1998). The literature presented to students reinforces that collective shame, bringing with it a disproportionate rate of death for Black America (Avery, 2020).

One might question the role that literature plays in fostering a climate of violence and devalued lives. In a candid self-assessment, Avery notes a disturbing trend. “If my students read only books I assigned them, they might conclude that the Black male body is a problem that needs to be resolved—through destruction or disappearance—in order for literature to end satisfyingly and well” (Avery, 2020, p. 2). This macabre reality serves to reinforce the supremacy of Whiteness in a culture that legitimizes the ritualistic destruction of Black male lives. As impressionable students engage with material that repeatedly presents Black bodies as devalued, disposable objects, the fact that at least 229 Black deaths occurred at the hands of

police officers within a year after the murder of George Floyd (Rahman, 2021) becomes somewhat less surprising although certainly not less reprehensible.

By contrast, countering the deficit narrative with novels that reflect Afropossibility can add human-centered value to Black bodies. Sadly, America is a nation in which the value of human life is largely connected to the wealth it contains or represents. Lives that have been historically presented as disconnected from wealth are therefore easily deemed as less valuable. When students are inundated with literature that consistently presents Blacks as impoverished, gullible people, Black lives are devalued in the mind.

Further complicating this issue is limited exposure to contradict this sort of myopic representation. As geographic demographics often limit students' exposure to others beyond their race and ethnicity (Harrelson, 2021), literature offers essential windows into the lived experiences of non-White students. Racially diversifying literature in an affirming manner offers metaphysical interracial experiences that can allow White students to build ethnocultural empathy in areas where the racial homogeneity of a community impedes such contact (Findora & Hammond, 2021). Through literature that challenges the Afropessimist narrative, the Black body becomes less of an object that must be destroyed or ignored and more of a positive vicarious existence for the reader, irrespective of their own race.

But the converse is also true. As many students do not have access to Black communities on a regular basis, the devalued representation of Blacks in literature and other forms of media becomes the primary basis for determining the value of Black lives. For students, if the value of a Black life is limited to such as is presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), then, clearly, a Black life only matters when it has been brutally ended.

All teachers should critically examine their classroom bookshelves to ensure that their classroom is not “a racialized social formation shaped by the dynamics of whiteness to remain invisible through its normative hegemony” (Yancy, 2008, p. 43-44). Perhaps, in so doing, educators can prevent *their* Black students from becoming tomorrow’s headline.

### **Perpetuating a distorted Eurocentric historical narrative:**

The genesis of America’s history is often linked to the arrival of the early pilgrims with only a brief mention of the native peoples that inhabited this land for millennia prior. In many history classrooms, America’s indigenous population only arrives, conveniently, in time to serve the needs of the White pilgrims. And, of course, as is commonly depicted in Thanksgiving paintings, the Native Americans may join the pilgrims for dinner as long as they sit apart from the pilgrims on the ground while the Europeans eat at a table replete with spotless linens.

But America’s story began long before the first White Europeans appeared on its shores. In fact, the arrival of White Europeans marked the onset of a dismal chapter in the lives of those with darker skin. One cannot reasonably deny that America’s prosperity and its existence as a global superpower stems from land theft, dispossession, and enforced human labor (Warren, 2021). But the United States shows no collective repentance for the sins of the past or indeed for a system that continues to define racialized groups in a dichotomy of inclusion-exclusion (Busey, 2017) instead of defining them based on their humanity and contributions to a global society. This is largely due to a distorted Eurocentric view of history.

A Eurocentric view centers the historic record on the contributions of White Europeans and their descendants while trivializing the contributions of non-White individuals despite the existing complexity of non-White civilizations. The perpetuation of a distorted historical view

prevents Black heroes from taking their place on history's pedestals. While White European heroes are celebrated with monuments, legends, and paintings, nothing is said of Black heroes.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) presents an exclusively Eurocentric worldview and perspective. Scout's narration of Maycomb County's history centers around European and American conquests, including General Andrew Jackson's subjugation of the Creek Indians. In Scout's words, this conquest is where everything "really began" (Lee, 1960, p. 3) and that the entire Finch family's story rests upon this one act of genocide. Without remorse, Lee presents a myopic view of the world that fails to acknowledge the historical contributions of the Creeks, the Blacks, and all non-White peoples that inhabit the region. They simply do not exist for Scout—in part, no doubt, thanks to General Andrew Jackson's sword.

Centering Black heroism destabilizes a Eurocentric worldview and encourages the inclusion of non-Whites. Black heroism itself focuses on self-sacrifice as well as spiritual and political idealism (Bernier, 2012). However, when Blacks are portrayed exclusively as victims in the PK-12 pedagogy, our heroic tradition becomes non-existent. For example, most Americans will recall the tremendous sacrifice that took place at the Battle of Bunker (Breed's) Hill during the War for Independence. But many would be hard pressed to name one of the Black heroes such as Salem Poor who, though formerly enslaved, freely fought so bravely alongside White Massachusetts Patriots that 14 White officers wrote to the Massachusetts legislature commending his bravery (Collins, 2013). A myopic Eurocentric view of history skims over this fact and focuses on the courage of White members of the Continental Army and even White British soldiers adding in the contributions of non-Whites as an afterthought if at all. But an accurate rendition of history, which reflects the nation-building, limit-defying nature of Black

America proves to Black students that they *do* have a historical culture of which they can be proud (Walker & Russell, 2020).

Furthermore, a Eurocentric view prioritizes the physical attributes of the Black body instead of prioritizing the brilliance of Black minds and courage of Black hearts. This view limits violent racism to random acts executed by rogue White men (Busey, 2017) instead of exposing a nationwide system of slavery and racism in which both White men *and* White women were actively engaged. A pervasive force in itself, Eurocentrism leeches into the textbooks, novels, maps, and other visuals that are presented to the public. While students may be reading, they are reading materials that often exclusively reflect Whiteness (Culham, 2019) and White ideals. The result is a superimposition of Eurocentrism on history which, by definition, prevents an accurate depiction of humanity's global story.

However, just as the impact of near-sightedness can be ameliorated by corrective lenses, divorcing the American scholastic system from a Eurocentric view while embracing a polyvocal representation of history allows for all demographics within America to see the past more clearly. For Blacks, while slavery remains fundamental to the American chapter of our story (Warren, 2021), research indicates that students who separate themselves from the pejorative Eurocentric view, and move beyond slavery to discover successful African Americans, develop positivity about their own future, unapologetically accept their Blackness, and are inspired to achieve because of Blacks who have already done the same in spite of adversity (Walker & Russell, 2020).

Because the Eurocentric view of history presents Whites as the primary contributors to the intellectual development of Western civilization (Williams et al., 2020) Whiteness inherently

becomes the ideal. This indoctrination robs Black students of cultural pride and an accurate understanding of the historical record. Just as it would be historical murder to teach American history *sans* the contributions of George Washington—who initially banned Black people from the Continental Army and only reconsidered his racist approach due to his desperate need for manpower (Collins, 2013)—it is also murderous to teach a curriculum in which the lives of Black heroes such as Toussaint Louverture and James Armistead Lafayette are extinguished. For Black lives can only matter on the streets if they *first* matter in the classroom.

### **Enabling anti-Blackness**

American schools are spheres of violence. For Blacks, which already have a disproportionately high risk of violent death in America (Avery, 2020), schools are a place of perpetual metaphorical lynching (DuBois, 1926), spirit murder (Love, 2019), and identity displacement. School curricula has led to the devaluation and dehumanization of Blacks (Warren, 2022) through persistent depictions of Blacks as inferior beings that are incapable of success. If Black lives matter at all in America's schools, they matter very little.

Spencer (2022) characterizes the absence of Blacks, the misrepresentation or dehumanization of Black characterization, and the perpetuation of stereotypes as existing anti-Blackness in children's literature. By this definition, how many of America's teachers are racist in practice if not in personal belief? For DiAngelo (2018), anti-Blackness is a core part of the White identity which stems from a deep guilt or knowledge of White complicity in the atrocities that White individuals committed and continue to commit against Black people. While educators and districts decry anti-racist behavior, they actively promote racist perspectives through curricula that perpetuates the view of Black inferiority. Yes, the diversity box can be checked off once the mandatory presentations have been given. Yes, administrators can breathe relieved

sighs as legal requirements are once again met. But what implication do all these efforts have for the community (Museus & Wang, 2022)? What change, or transformative reflexivity (Mitchell, 2022), *actually* occurs?

Here again I cannot help but draw attention to the inconsistency presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the sole text featuring a Black character in four districts of southeastern Pennsylvania. One can argue that Atticus in working in the Black community as he chooses to defend Tom Robinson at cost of his reputation. But working in and on a community does not equate working *for* and *with* a community (Warren, 2022). Atticus does not encourage partnership with the Black community by soliciting the input, by advocating for a qualified panel of Black jurors (as is Tom Robinson's Constitutional right), or by fighting to ensure that Maycomb County changes its racist approach. Atticus simply does what he feels is right, spouts trite adages, then effectively washes his hands of the matter once Tom Robinson is condemned and ultimately murdered. Why not immediately advocate for an appeal? Why not attempt to actively engage the community in changing the clearly racist atmosphere regardless of whether or not the action is successful?

Here, by Atticus's example, *Mockingbird* (1960) teaches those who hold social power that racism is acceptable as long as it has been addressed in a manner that the individual deems appropriate. But racism is never acceptable. To not challenge the prevalence of racism in society is to enable anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness is an endemic aspect of every echelon in American society (Coles, 2020). Again, it is one thing to work *on* a situation involving the Black community. It is another thing to work *with* and *for* the Black community. With that said, how can educators and districts claim they are working *for* and *with* the Black community when the

stories surrounding members of said community are either completely absent from curricula or solely depict Black lives as being inferior and on a grail-like quest for equality?

Research indicates that a teacher's mindset can positively or negatively impact Black male learning outcomes (Husband & Kang, 2020). Teachers who uphold Whiteness as the ideal are fundamentally encouraging the perpetuation of anti-Blackness. While Atticus is portrayed as the ideal character, educators and readers of *Mockingbird* (1960) should question why Tom Robinson, the story's tragic victim, is *not* idealized in the eyes of the reader. Even after his death, Robinson is vilified because of the color of his skin while Atticus is praised. Why? Can it be because Whiteness is the ideal in this story and the fatal cancer of anti-Blackness has metastasized throughout the novel? If so, educators risk having the same disease spread to their students.

White perception of Black lives is clearly impacted by anti-Black depictions in the media (Hurley et al., 2015). Even media that is designed to amplify Black voices often seeks to reproduce White standards of beauty (Warren, 2022) thus implying that only characters who "look White" or "act White" can be successful. For example, it is highly doubtful that any student reader would want to be like Calpurnia or Tom Robinson in Lee's *Mockingbird* (1960). When contrasted with the representations of White women, such as Scout's pretty schoolteacher or Atticus Finch himself, the upward correlation between the quality of Black lives and White assimilation becomes clear (Warren, 2022).

Sealy-Ruiz, Haddix, and Lavache (2022) target the anti-Black nature of the PK-12 curriculum when they write,

An essential design of [the] educational experience is for [Black students] to believe they are without history, that their culture is barbaric and uncivilized, and that the success of Black people is often dependent on their ability to assimilate by accepting and/or adopting European perspectives. (p. 114)

Texts that portray or imply Blacks as victims, while failing to amplify the voices of Black heroes, justify anti-Black rhetoric and denigrate Black lives to a perpetual subservient role. The tragic result is often a rejection of Blackness by Black youth. For many, Blackness becomes an inescapable nighttime (Warren, 2021) filled with futile attempts to mimic the majoritarian standards of beauty, history, and culture in hope of becoming someone other than they are.

By contrast, creating a curriculum that centralizes the audacious celebration of Blackness signifies the beginning of change (Tosolt, 2019) and the systematic eradication of anti-Blackness from the classroom. It shifts the focus from the rote discussion on racism's negative impact on people of color to how racism elevates White people (DiAngelo, 2018) at the expense of those who are socially deemed inferior. It refuses to accept a story that centers White achievement and tells a story that centers Black dexterity and genius when confronted with unimaginable horrors (Tosolt, 2019). In this sort of curriculum, it becomes impossible to exclusively present the deficit narrative such as the one portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) because the educator has chosen to become an abolitionist teacher and actively combats the anti-Blackness that stalks the halls of American schools.

### **Reinforcement of White Supremacy**

Finally, an exclusively deficit narrative promotes the fallacy of White supremacy. White supremacy is the warped progeny of a bygone age. Racial dialogue is often contextualized in a

manner that upholds a hierarchy which protects and rewards Whiteness (Brunson & Edward, 2022) as is evidenced by White fragility and a sociopolitical climate that considers conversations surrounding race to be taboo (Bucholtz, 2019). Because language is associated with attitude (Meyerhoff, 2018), novels that exclusively project Afropessimism—or an identity founded upon tragedy instead of a balanced view that weaves Black shame with Black glory—can only be viewed as hostile to Blackness and allied with White supremacy.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) provides no shortage of examples of White supremacy. “Lee’s text perpetuates racial disparity through a White savior narrative and the utter absence of Black perspectives” (Wheeler et al., 2021, p. 5). I cannot help but wonder if the novel would be as successful were the races of the protagonists reversed. If Atticus Finch was a Black lawyer and Tom Robinson a White menial worker who was on trial for his life, would this novel win a Pulitzer and still find its place in classrooms more than fifty years after its initial publication? I find that very unlikely because *Black* supremacy has never been an issue for America. It is a pretentious notion that would be deemed laudable by many while White Supremacy remains a very real premise that governs every aspect of life for millions across the nation.

Kendi (2019) contends that Whiteness, even as a false social construction, has shaped American society and identity in offering White Americans privilege—foremost of which is the privilege of being considered normal and legal. This premise of White privilege is a direct threat to the ontological and epistemological welfare of non-White students which necessitates the creation of safe spaces (Broome et al., 2019) if the dream of a non-racialized America is to ever be more than just a dream. Classrooms can become the ideal racial safe space (Brunson & Edward, 2022). However, negative language projected through literature inhibits the creation of

safe spaces while reinforcing discomfort with candid discussions about race on the part of both White and non-White students.

As BIPOC students may avoid race-related conversations for their own protection (Moss & O'Connor, 2020), and the vast majority of American teachers are White, middle-class females whose own White fragility (Tosolt, 2019) often leads to stilted conversations about race and racism (Brunson & Edward, 2022), non-White students are likely to remain in a disadvantaged position while Whiteness continues to occupy a position of dominance. Escayg (2020) spotlights the problem in stating, “White teachers, through the element of White privilege, reinscribe dominant racial meanings by constructing a classroom environment that reifies Whiteness as the standard and as the norm” (p. 3), while Kendi (2019) shows that only individuals who actively work to disrupt systemic, organizational, and political racism can consider themselves to be antiracists—a standard that many White educators would be hard-pressed to meet.

In many cases, literature offers society a means of dismantling the insidious notion of White supremacy but only if an accurate portrayal of Blackness is given to those on the receiving end. As demonstrated by the overview of anti-Blackness in American education, this is not the case. The picture that *is* presented to students is one in which White children are the beautiful princesses, the limit-shattering scientists, and the intrepid explorers while Black children are caricatured as enslaved people or their impoverished offspring. White and Wanless (2019) cite this marginalization as being responsible for much of the harm to Black children. “Because Black people have historically been assigned the lowest status in the American racial hierarchy, U.S. racism causes undue harm to Black children in particular” (p. 73). These cultural representations reinforce the racist view that Whites are guardians of power while perpetuating

systemic inequalities (Spencer, 2022) and excluding non-Whites who are misrepresented or are absent from literature altogether.

In 2020, amid the maelstrom of a global pandemic and the turbulence of George Floyd's murder, I began working with a local government organization in which I was the sole minority. As the Coronavirus spread across our county, one of my coworkers innocently asked if I had brought the virus to our area. He felt no compunctions about explaining his reasoning. Because I am a Black man, he wrongly assumed that I lived in the city and was more likely to contract the virus. Because of historic and current literature and media representations that characterize Blacks as impoverished individuals, Blacks are still assumed by many to be unable to enjoy the same social privileges as Whites (Cavaliere & Wilcox, 2022). Media that reinforces this concept obviate the success of Blacks while reinforcing White supremacy. By contrast, Black students who learn about the full scope of their historical past feel empowered to become productive advocates for Black equality (Walker & Russell, 2021).

### **Black affirming practices that counter negative outcomes**

Historically Black colleges and universities are bastions of Black culture due to the very fact that their existence stemmed from a society that limited integration (Williams et al., 2021). All-Black educational institutions focused on helping students see their Blackness as a wonderful part of their identity instead of a problem to be escaped (Warren, 2021). These institutions can therefore provide guidance as to effective pedagogical practices that can be implemented in PK-12 classrooms. While the focus of this paper is not an exhaustive list of affirming practices, I believe a brief look at three strategies employed by HCBUs can be helpful to educators willing to

become abolitionist teachers (Love, 2019) and work to counter the negative outcomes produced by canonical literature that perpetuates anti-Black tropes.

### **Cultural Validation**

A review of the literature reflects a centering of Black cultural validation in the instructional pedagogy as well as the promotion of Black excellence to students and the broader public (Williams et al., 2021). The concept of White supremacy is disrupted as students begin their study of Black past with a thorough understanding of African culture and civilization instead of slavery (Walker & Russell, 2020). This approach allows for Black students to reflect on the past glories of both their ancestors and Black heroic individuals while cultivating a mindset that challenges White supremacy.

### **Normalizing Black success**

Successful Blacks are seen as the exception to the rule. Normalizing Blackness requires that as many or more books about heroic Blacks, *by* Black authors, populate the classroom bookshelves (Muller et al., 2022). Those books should reflect the brilliant past and present of Blackness while paying tribute to the myriads of Black heroes who have transformed, and continue to transform, America.

### **Positive race dialogue**

It is self-evident that interracial discussion about race that is founded upon *positive* contributions of Blacks to society will be better received than discussions that center slavery and racial injustice. As a conversation that centers Black brilliance does not necessarily incriminate the White participants, there will be less psychological retreat to a state of White fragility. This

in turn will facilitate candid race-centered conversations in the classroom, reduce the discomfort normally fostered by a myopic view of the past, and disrupt the institutionalized fallacy of White supremacy.

### Summary

Teaching literature that presents Blacks exclusively as victims fosters a host of negative outcomes. Five of these include:

1. An increased likelihood of a negative self-image on the part of Black students
2. The devaluation of Black (male) lives
3. Perpetuating a distorted Eurocentric historical narrative
4. Enabling anti-Blackness
5. The reinforcement of White Supremacy

Each of these outcomes can be sparked at any point in the PK-12 continuum. The potential for each of these outcomes can be fostered by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) which prevents the novel from consideration as a Black-affirming aspect of a literature curriculum.

Black students face these challenges throughout their PK-12 years and, indeed, throughout life.

However, presenting students with asset-framing literature, or Black heroic amplification, can meaningfully impact both Black and majoritarian students. Muller et al. (2022) identify five objectives contained DuBois' *Brownies' Books* (1926). Prominent among these goals is the need for challenging stereotypes, communicating the beauty of being Black, and the need to continuously present Black world-shapers (Muller et al., 2022) to both Blacks and the general public.

## Discussion

To the best of my knowledge, this analysis is the first to examine *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the lens of the DuVernay Test (Dargis, 2016). It also appears to be the first to examine the detrimental impacts of anti-Black content in this part of canonical literature. As *To Kill a Mockingbird* fails the DuVernay test (Dargis, 2016) and does not challenge the dominant narrative (Kaye, 2020), I call on educators to resist including this novel in the curriculum. Alternatively, educators should encourage students to look at the narrative in a critical lens, or one that challenges inequity (Short, 2017) with the goal of analyzing how the narrative presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) fails to effectively represent the Black story and does damage to the Black soul. In addition, educators should preface any study of this novel, or any similar novel with a period of hero amplification, a short study on Black historical or cultural contributions to society. Educators should subsequently counteract *Mockingbird's* (1960) deficit-framing with two pieces of literature that affirm the Black presence and meet the requirements of the DuVernay framework (Dargis, 2016).

Both the DuVernay Test (Dargis, 2016) and the negative impacts outlined underscore the importance of educators offering students content that presents fully-realized Black characters. As counter-storytelling is used to create and communicate narratives that challenge the dominant, deficit and racist narrative (Husband & Kang, 2020), portraying the richness of Black culture is a critical part of changing student perceptions. It is essential that educators weave authentic, culturally-affirming representations of Black heroes into their curriculum. These representations should be rich depictions of historic and contemporary Blackness, crafted by Black authors and illustrators, and contain plotlines that *cannot* progress if the characters were of another race (Muller et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

For too long, canonical texts, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), have supported a stereotypical view of Blackness despite calls for increased diversity and representation. Perpetuating these anti-Black tropes have negative impacts upon Black *and* non-Black students. Additional research should continue to investigate the long-term consequences of exposure to deficit-framing literature and the mechanisms through which the deficit narrative persists in American schools. Educators and district boards should adopt an abolitionist perspective (Love, 2019) if teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) within the classroom. An abolitionist perspective seeks to free Black students from a distorted Eurocentric narrative that condemns them to perpetual states of metaphorical bondage, mediocrity, and outright inferiority. It is my hope that this paper will assist in developing culturally appropriate content that can result in all students seeing each other as unique but equal human beings.

## Limitations

The current findings should be interpreted while considering the following limitations. First, my research focused only on the representation of Blacks in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Future research should also examine the impact of negatively representing or excluding Blacks in other canonical texts. As no direct interviews of teachers were conducted, it is impossible to state what measures educators may or may not take to mitigate *To Kill a Mockingbird's* (1960) negative impact. A mixed methods study which draws upon interviews by both students and faculty as well as utilizing quantitative methods that assess Black and non-Black student race-conscious perceptions would be invaluable. Finally, this paper did not analyze negative outcomes by grade level. Future research would do well to assess whether certain student cohorts are impacted more by deficit-framing than others. For example, are Black elementary students more

likely to develop a negative self-image than middle grade? The limitations notwithstanding, this paper makes important contributions that can inform praxis.

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