

Race Bating By Angel Eduardo

“Your first two words,” I announced to the class, “are *I want*.”

I started the timer on my phone and watched as the room full of seventh graders scribbled into their notebooks. It was five minutes for them to free write, but also time for me to get my bearings. I had no idea how any of this would go over.

This gig, teaching a ten-day creative writing course at a suburban New Jersey middle school, was easy to accept back in November. My soul-sucking office temp job, mounting student debt, and dwindling prospects of finding writing work after graduating with my MFA made it easy to accept the money they offered, but as the first day approached I had begun to worry. Would I be able to relate to these kids? Would anything I planned work out? As a writer and musician I’d gotten used to putting my mistakes out there for the whole world to see, and as I drove through their tree-lined streets that first morning I resolved that, worst case scenario, this would be another one of those. I might even learn something.

Walking between the rows of desks as the students wrote, I tried to take them in. They were typical twelve-to-thirteen-year-olds: braces and awkward hair styles, ill-fitting clothes and untied laces. They all carried huge, overstuffed binders and book bags, papers messily jutting out every which way. They ranged in size from gnomish to gangly, all of them still figuring out how to carry their changing bodies. Still, bits of personality came through. The ones in the back leaned towards the windows and stared out, disaffected. The ones in the front, mostly girls, sat up straight, with their pencils and pens in neat little rows.

My timer went off.

“Okay,” I said, “Let’s hear what you came up with.”

I pointed to a girl in the front, and she proceeded to read off a list. “I want to be on the beach. I want a new swimsuit. I want a new iPhone and a new sparkle case...”

“Ok,” I nodded. “Good. Good.” Finding little there to work with I moved on to another student, and he rattled off something similar, about wanting sneakers, video games, a bigger television. Another girl talked about her father’s boat and spending a month in the Bahamas. I tried to remain gracious, but this wasn’t relieving my discomfort at all. I wasn’t expecting them to pour their hearts out, but I’d hoped they’d come up with something I could dig into, something to get them thinking more creatively and help me ease into this whole thing. I felt my anxiety creeping up.

I pointed to one more kid towards the back of the room. “How about you?” I asked. He looked up at me, his eyes wide and glassy. He had wavy brown hair and big ears that stuck out from a face that was all chin.

“Uh...” he said as he picked up his notebook and braced himself.

“I want to go skiing. I want to be on the mountain...”

I felt my stomach drop. This is going to be impossible, I thought, my anxiety boiling over. Of course this white boy goes skiing. Of course that’s all he cares about. Sneakers? Boats? Big TVs? These kids are living lives I wouldn’t even dream of, and they were born into it all. Their parents probably were, too. My parents came here from the Dominican Republic with next to nothing and worked for decades to get my siblings and me to a house in the suburbs. To us, that house was the end, not the beginning. To us, vacations were rare. Skiing and going to the Bahamas weren’t things I would even conceive of, but these kids rattled them off as though they were

grocery lists. They started at the top and knew nothing else. How could I incite poetry from them? What connection to reality, what *feelings* about the world could they possibly have? What did I really expect from a bunch of—

At that moment I caught myself, derailing my train of thought before it reached where I could feel it was going. I felt a deep pang of shame at what I had just done to this boy—to the entire class. My shame then shifted to a rush of anger at myself, as I racked my brain about why, and how easily, I had even gone there.

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Since grade school, I had treated racism the way I did the belief that the Earth was flat, or that Elvis was still alive: a laughable, intellectually bankrupt idea—something only idiots could honestly espouse. I had been taught that judging a book by its cover was wrong, that people were more than just the color of their skin or what country they came from. I'd learned about the Holocaust and American slavery, and the terrible suffering and destruction that resulted from the belief in these arbitrary divisions between people. I had seen depictions of Martin Luther King and heard his speeches, and the message rang loud and clear for me. As far as I was concerned, the jury was in. Racism was a ridiculous, evil idea, and it was unintelligent and morally wrong to think that way.

As a result, I became more focused on what people thought, rather than how they looked or where they were from. Ideas became all that mattered to me—the only way to really get to know and understand anyone or anything. I would read an article and ask myself, Was it well-written? Were good points made? Did it make me think? I would read a book and ask myself if the story was well-told, if I was immersed in the world the author created. I would often quote writers and artists and philosophers without being totally sure who said the things I was reciting. I had internalized these concepts so deeply that the author of an idea was, to me, often of little consequence except as a potential source for more, better ideas.

But in the last few years I had found myself reflexively considering other things instead. Was the author white? A woman? Left- or right-leaning? The answers to these questions influenced my opinion before I even read what they had to say, and I found myself swallowing my true reactions to the material in favor of those I knew were politically and socially acceptable. I found it harder to disagree or criticize the work if the writer was a woman, or a “person of color.” I found myself self-censoring, simply because of how my response might *sound*, what it might *imply*, and how “people like me” might take it. It was a thought pattern I had noticed in others, and though I consciously scoffed at it, it had begun to operate in my own mind as well.

This was a growing habit that ran rampant through my graduate school experience. As my MFA program went on, I began to have trouble focusing on a writer's prose, their lyrical ability, the sharpness of their craft—the things I'd enrolled to learn about—and more on what their work said politically. I worried about what it meant that we were reading *this* book in class rather than another. I found myself counting how many female authors we read versus male, how many white authors versus “writers of color.” Once, after the first class of a new semester, I commented to some classmates that I thought the reading list on our syllabus was “pretty diverse.” The look of disgusted, bewildered disagreement on their faces made me realize how differently I was using that word. For me, it meant that the authors we were reading were people with different styles, different voices, different perspectives. To them, it meant something else entirely, and I was beginning to think the same way without even wanting to.

To be sure, these are questions worth asking, and the idea of equality of representation is an important one. In any instance or circumstance where the voices of certain classes or groups of people are being shut out, that is a crime that demands justice—as I learned from Dr. King years ago. But something else had begun to happen here—a kind of overcorrection. Suddenly ideas were less important than the people who originated them. A white person’s good point wasn’t as valid or interesting simply because they were white. This went against all of my intellectual and moral instincts, against the very thing I had been taught as a boy. Indeed, it seemed to fly in the face of the very mantra that famously crystallized it all: *not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character*.

Still, it was pervasive, and difficult for me to avoid. I became acutely aware of my own ethnicity, and the ethnicity of those around me, even when it was a detail of no consequence—which it often was. I felt those details creating subtle divides between my classmates and me, between me and everyone I encountered, regardless of the context. I felt professors walking on eggshells for fear of offending someone’s sensibilities with completely innocuous comments about the texts we read. I felt the classroom factionalizing, our communication faltering. An insidious poison had seeped in while everyone was busy navigating the minefield of labels and divisions, and it had finally gotten me, too.

It all came to a head for me one night after class, when a classmate was relating their experience in New Orleans to me and another classmate. I had never been, and was curious. I asked about the music, the food, the vibe down there. My classmate gushed about all of these things, and their passion was reigniting my desire to visit. Then, my classmate smiled and, in a voice slowly ramping with excitement, said, “And there were more poor white people than black people!”

I stood aghast as my two classmates shared an enthusiastic high-five over this comment, to which the other responded with, “Yes! Justice!” Their mirth was effervescent, and it shot right through me.

Reflexively, I blurted out, “Don’t high-five over that!” But my incredulity weakened my delivery, and my voice was drowned by their laughter. I didn’t think they had heard me, and I didn’t bother to repeat myself. I fell silent, the moment passed, and I never stopped feeling horrible about it. I had let a truly awful, dehumanizing moment slide, and I had done so because of *who* had spoken it. That was the most difficult part to deal with; both of my classmates are lovely human beings, and I adore them. My shock was in response to the incongruity of such heinous things being produced by genuinely good people, but that was the nature of the poison. It rotted everyone from within—even me. In an eye blink I had asked myself the same questions I had begun to ask when I read a book or article, and I had decided that *who* said the horrible thing, what color their skin was, and what gender they were, gave me no right to contest it, no matter how viscerally I disagreed.

I felt a similar shame then as I did in that seventh grade classroom, when out of my own discomfort and anxiety I went on a mental rampage against this young boy I had just met not twenty minutes earlier. I hadn’t even learned his name, but I had quickly and easily reduced him to a caricature, some straw man of a white person that was easy for me to rail against for all the things I felt were wrong or unfair about my own situation. Instead of listening to him and trying to connect with his obvious love for something I knew nothing about, I had chosen to make a judgment by simply looking at him. I loathed myself for it.

I stared at this boy as he finished reading, and I worked to force all those poisonous notions from my mind. He’s just a kid. He didn’t do anything wrong. In all likelihood his parents didn’t do anything wrong. We should all be so lucky, to live lives where skiing and sailing are

commonplace. Simply being white doesn't guarantee him to be anything any more than simply being Dominican guarantees me to anything, good or bad. Race be damned, we are total strangers. The next few days would give me the opportunity to meet and interact with him—with all of these kids. Their wants were no less valid than mine, their experiences no less interesting, no less human. They were all people, with lives and perspectives I could only empathize with if I opened myself to them, in the true and beautiful way that art can allow. In that moment I became determined to do just that. To actually get to know these students would take effort, and I resolved to put that effort in, whatever the cost to my comfort.

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A few days later, I came to class with my guitar, thinking I could show the kids how inspiration for one medium can often come from another. When people ask me the difference between my process in writing music or poetry or prose, I always tell them art is art. The medium changes, the details change, but at bottom the inspiration—the process—is the same. To show the kids this, I began our session by asking them what sorts of music they liked. After a few responses — “Hip-hop,” “Beyonce,” “Anything but country music,”— I pointed to that same, big-eared and wide-eyed kid who sat near the back. “How about you?” I asked.

He suddenly perked up and said, “Oh, I listen to a lot of Spanish music.”

“Really?” I said, taken aback. That’s hardly what I expected to hear. “Spanish music, huh?”

“Yeah,” he responded, brushing back a lock of his wavy brown hair. “My mom’s Dominican and my dad’s Peruvian, so I listen to a lot of merengue and salsa and stuff.”

“Wow,” I said.

I stared at the boy, slowly cracking a smile, and added, “I’m Dominican too.”