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Teaching against assumptions about the Black experience in America

Cassander L. Smith

I wrote an article about teaching early Black American literature at a time when most students consider the question of racial difference irrelevant. We had a two-term Black president. The Civil Rights Act was passed over 50 years earlier. Students did not want to talk about race. The article laid out a pedagogical approach that asked students to form their own individual conceptions of how "Blackness" and nationality were or were not connected in early American writings, and how that nebulous space of race and self-identification then affect our understanding of race in America today. I ended the article with the question: "If we have not arrived in a state of post-racial bliss and stability, then where are we? That question might be the greatest source of tension in the classroom and beyond." Where are we indeed?

Today our students have a very different relationship to discussions of race in the classroom. However, my charge remains largely the same: it is my job as a professor to guide them to their own critical, informed understandings of how race functions in the world around them from the past to the present.

When I teach early writing from Black Americans, I begin the class with an episode from the TV show *black-ish*. I want them to use the show as a way into these texts that

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might at first seem too distant in time to feel relevant. First airing on the network ABC in 2014, the situational comedy *black-ish* follows the lives of a Black family living in an upscale suburb of Los Angeles where very few other Black families live. The show derives its comedic energy and its tension from the generational gap between the father named Andre Johnson, who grew up fully immersed in "Black" culture, and his children, who are engaging less in terms of race and more in terms of economic and social connections.

In the scene I highlight, Andre tells a story about what happened at school earlier that day. He and his son entered the school parking lot and passed by another Black father and son. Andre dutifully nods at the father, but his son Junior passes by his Black classmate without performing the head nod.

> Andre: Pop. You should have seen it. The boy just stared at him. No nod - like his neck was broken.
>
> Pop: Well, maybe something is wrong with his neck. Did you ask him? Something wrong with your neck? Boy?
>
> Junior: What? No. I mean, I don't think so.
>
> Rainbow: So, he didn't nod at somebody. I don't get what the big deal is.
>
> Andre: Of course, you don't. Look, babe, the nod is important. It's the internationally accepted yet unspoken sign of acknowledgement of Black folks around the world. So, no matter who you are or where you are at, it's your duty to give the nod. Even in the most extreme of circumstances, we always found a way to let each other know, 'I see you bruh,'

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> Rainbow: Dre, please do not turn this into yet another thing. The truth is that Junior's generation has a different perspective on the struggle than you and Pops. Can't you just let that be a good thing?
>
> Andre: No!

Andre's shock at his son's cultural illiteracy represents his own anxieties about his racial identity, especially when at the end of the episode, he sees his son finally employing the head nod, but directing it at one of his non-black classmates. The episode raises a number of questions with which I ask students to grapple. What is the significance of the head nod? What is the source of the disconnect between Andre and his son? What does it mean ultimately to be Black-ish? I show this episode to my students in order to prime them for conversations about race and the existential quandaries that defined the life experiences and literature of Black Americans in earlier eras.

In 18th-century African American literature, race was no more self-evident than it was for the Johnson children in the 21st century. I have my students read the 1760 captivity narrative of a Black enslaved sailor named Briton Hammon. In his telling, he is on a ship off the coast near Cape Florida when he is attacked by Native Americans. They kill everyone aboard except for Hammon, who they take captive. This event initiates a nearly 13-year ordeal in which Hammon is held captive by first Native American and then Spanish forces down in Cuba. All the while he longs to return, and eventually does, to his master Winslow in Massachusetts. Hammon's narrative is interesting because it centers a Black man in a genre of literature that usually would center a white woman—the captivity narrative. However, it identifies his race in only one place—on the title page. In the actual narrative, he marks himself as a British subject experiencing the same kind of ordeal as his Anglo-colonial New England counterparts.

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Because the students have already watched and discussed an episode of *black-ish*, they are ready to discuss some of the racial politics in this text. In fact, they often find commonalities between Andre's identity struggles and Hammon's efforts to articulate his identity. I ask them to think critically about Hammon's racial consciousness. Does he himself speak as a Black subject, as an American colonist? An English subject? Or a displaced African? If his narrative is the beginning of an African American literary tradition as scholars say, then what is African American about his text?

When I ask them to think more critically about the degrees of captivity that Hammon experiences, students really engage with his psyche. They wrestle with big concepts like Stockholm syndrome and hegemony to articulate the complexities of the racial politics at work in the story. Importantly, the text becomes for them, not an illustration of Black suffering, but an occasion to really unpack the nuanced experiences of a Black African living in 18th-century America.

Then we read Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In the poem Wheatley muses about her own Christian conversion experience. She constructs herself as the model convert, a self-avowed African heathen who finds religion in America.

> 'Twas mercy, brought me from my pagan land,
> taught my benighted soul to understand
> that there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a diabolic dye."
> Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
> may be refin'd and join th'angelic train.

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I have them read the poem in two parts. In the first pair of couplets, the speaker seemingly embodies a persona who understands Blackness as inferior. But the second half of the poem challenges the self-deprecation that the first four lines imply. In the final couplet, the speaker transforms into a critic who is no longer contemplating the problem of blackness but proposing the solution. She cautions white Christians to "remember" that "Negros, black as Cain, can be refin'd and join th'angelic train." For Wheatley, that "refinement" is crucial since it has the potential to wash away racial difference by bringing people together under the umbrella of a common Christian identity. This is when I bring students back to our discussion of *black-ish*. In Wheatley's poem, Christian refinement makes the "negro" somewhat blackish rather than wholly "black as Cain." On the other side, white Christian readers risk a spiritual darkening—a blackening of the soul, if you will—by not acknowledging or by impeding the redemptive potential of African Americans.

I have students compare and contrast Hammon and Wheatley's racial rhetoric—or the lack thereof. Both envision an American space that elides racial difference. I ask students to note any modern-day resonances in how the two writers talk about race. Especially in a moment when the topic of race in classrooms is so politically polarized, this discussion forces students to dive deep into the rhetoric of race across a vast expanse of time, outside the tunnel vision of the contemporary politics of race.

What might the writings of Briton Hammon and Phillis Wheatley tell us about the developmental eras of racial thought that have defined the United States' social politics? What might they tell us about the experiences of Black Americans today?