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GPF

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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## To Let the Play Go On or To End “The Living Death of Silence”?

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This fall, students at Shorewood High School prepared to perform *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on Harper Lee’s 1960 novel. Less than a week before the premiere [scheduled](#) for October 11, [protests](#) broke out because of the use of N-word in the script, and this sparked a heated controversy as to whether the play should go on or be cancelled. One outcome of the debacle was an event titled “[A community conversation about race](#)” which was organized by the school board and [superintendent](#) as a response to “the need to engage in these difficult conversations about race and racial inequities as a way to improve our schools and our village”.

Listening to the protesting voices at the community event on October 16, I heard several people emphasize the trigger effect of the N-word caused a re-traumatization of the students of color; some suggested the actors omit the N-word in the performance, a solution that proved unrealizable due to copy right laws. To frame the protesting voices within a discussion on literacy, Eric Darnell Pritchard’s *Fashioning Lives* conceptualizes, in the tradition of Paulo Freire and Sojourner Truth, literacy as “reading the word and reading the world” (80). In our case, we literally have a word that is situated in a context of colorblind racism; to help us see the potency of that word in that play, Pritchard’s conceptualization of “literacy normativity” - which describes literacies designed to sustain marginalization of racialized bodies, inflicting harm and pain - is instructive. In insisting on the play - an act of literacy normativity - to go on in spite of protests against inflicting harm and pain, that is exactly what is happening. Saliiently, however, Pritchard also proposes the concept of “restorative literacies” which are literacies that heal. Pritchard writes, “Restorative literacies are part of the long African American tradition Elaine Richardson calls ‘survival literacies’. These survival literacies work to guard individuals against ... ‘the living death of silence’.” (34). Indeed, the resistance expressed at Shorewood High School can be seen as restorative, an act of self-care and even love, which Pritchard defines as, “a radical praxis of freedom and self-care in the face of a social, political, and cultural circumstance in which you and your people are targeted for debasement, degradation, and in many cases, death.” (36). At the event, a student read aloud an [Instagram](#) message reacting to the protesters with racist and threatening content, reminding us these conversations do concern life and death.

Heeding the voices of resistance against the N-word in any context (and colonial ideologies that buttress it), I think the time is ripe to reconsider the benefits of asking high school students to read, and much less perform, Harper Lee’s novel. I understand that if the goal is to generate classroom dialogues about racism and equality, there are [other novels and plays available](#) that center and humanize people of color rather than representing them as *minor* characters (e.g. Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes*, Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*, and David Chariandy’s *Brother*). At the meeting, though, Shorewood High School’s drama director rather unapologetically claimed to have chosen *To Kill a Mockingbird* to encourage more “minority students to join [the drama club]”, and though his intentions appear to be harmless, he is, in fact, enacting a modern and subtle form of colonialism. Using Django Paris and H. Samy Alim’s *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* (2017) as a lens, we learn “CSP is about complicating, sustaining, and extending what is important to students and their lives, not just what is important to educators and their agendas, whether their agendas are social justice-driven or not” (Wong and Peña, 125). The colonialist aspect of the drama director’s actions lies in his setting the agenda *for* the minority students; in plowing ahead and disregarding what the students might have deemed important to dramatize; and in silencing their voices when they raised them in

protest against having to listen to White students utter the N-word 44 times. Many people voiced the point that this is a play; it is White *characters*. - not White *students* - shouting the word. But guess what? Testimonials confirmed White students *do* habitually use the N-word, and even if they didn't, does a White person get to decide hearing the N-word in the context of a play isn't harmful? The epitome of the modern colonial spirit is when the colonizer dictates the terms of healing and reconciliation.

In the end, whether the voices of resistance were heard or whether safety concerns were given priority, the play was [cancelled](#), leaving me hoping for climate changes in the community, and for instructional and staffing changes at the school. -GPF