Putting on a Virtual Black-Face: A Classroom Analysis of "Grand Theft Auto"

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As my tenth grade World Literature students were packing up their bags to leave my class and head home for the day, Joey—one of the (only) five boys enrolled in this honors class—turned to me with a smile on his way out the door and said, "Okay, so, it was an eye opener and whatever, but GTA is still a great way to blow off some steam." I'd spent the last 55 minutes walking through a close analysis of the video game "Grand Theft Auto" with 32 sophomores at the suburban high school where I teach. We were nearing the end of our study of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and the week prior, a colleague from graduate school had mentioned to me an activity he did with his students analyzing Wright's narrative of blackness with the narrative of blackness and of whiteness propagated by this best-selling video game. I'd decided to give the activity a try, and at the end of that day, I was feeling good about the lesson—good about the incorporation of this "untraditional" text, good about the courageous conversations about race and racism that I was trying to start in my classroom, good about the "eye opening" moments I could see happening with a lot of my students that day—but his comment sucked the air right out of me. I guess the more liberal parts of me were envisioning students going home and burning their copies of Grand Theft Auto on their front lawns, or at least telling Mom and Dad about their English teacher's cool video game lesson that day. I wasn't particularly expecting to hear while my close analysis was "an eye opener and whatever," that the game would still be fulfilling a particular need for that student, and realistically, for many more like him.

It's been seven months since that day in my classroom, and I have more perspective on the lesson and on students' vocal and written responses to it. There are some major trends emerging from their comments that echo much of what Thandeka and Mica Pollock describe in their books *Learning to be White*, and *Colormute*, respectively. But Joey's comment is the one that sticks; I'll return to it shortly.

The Context

I teach at a suburban high school with student self-reported demographics of 84% White, 8% Black, 6% Asian, and roughly 2% Native American. My last class of the day was the one section of "Enriched English 10" that I taught. The course is intended to be World Literature based, but the curriculum largely consists of cast-off books from the 11th and 12th grade bookrooms, so despite its intended focus of literature from outside the U.S.A., we teach Cormac McCarthy, Arthur Miller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Julia Alvarez alongside authors who actually *are* from other countries. My class was 27 girls and only 5 boys. Of those 32, I had 1 Pakistani girl, 1 African-American girl, 1 Moroccan girl, and 1 Asian girl. The rest were white. Nobody in the class was on free or reduced price lunch. Students had spent the two weeks prior to our "Grand Theft Auto" activity reading *Black Boy*, and had read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* before that. We had been talking about race and racism explicitly in class—its constructions in the texts (print and otherwise) that we were examining and its constructions in our school. I should mention that this explicit focus on race felt (and still feels) risky to me. While I didn't have any parent complaints, the colleague with whom I was teaming did. The complaints were veiled—

questions around the "quality" of *Black Boy*, and what "skills" students were learning that wouldn't be better served by a more "classic" and "appreciated" book. All of that is to say that while issues of race and racism are hugely apparent in the halls of our school, race is, to steal from Pollock, "the great unsaid."

The Activity

I created a PowerPoint presentation to lead students through an analysis of the game in class. The title slide had images from the game—a collage of, among other things, a helicopter, a bandanna covering the bottom half of a black man's face while he holds a gun, a blonde woman wearing sunglasses (and presumably nothing else, though the camera angle hides her body), poker chips, and three men shooting guns out the side of a car. (See image below.) The deck, from the very beginning obviously, was stacked.

The next slide offered students a bit of context and made connections to Wright and *Black Boy*. In the first two chapters of *Black Boy*, Wright sets up what he describes as a "culture war" between whites and blacks. The memoir proffers up a particular narrative of what it means to be black and what it means to be white in Richard Wright's world. His first description of black people is in the first chapter of the book: "Solace came when I wandered about the boat and gazed at Negroes throwing dice, drinking whisky, playing cards, lolling on boxes, eating, talking, and singing" (10). I asked students to keep Wright's narrative of blackness in mind as we viewed video of Grand Theft Auto. I showed students an eight minute clip from the opening of the game, as well as a two minute clip of a scene in the Police Station and asked students to keep notes on the following questions as they watched:

- What narrative of blackness is presented in Grand Theft Auto?
- What does the story in the opening sequence center around? What's the context the game places CJ in at the beginning?
- What does CJ sound like? Dress like? Move like?
- Who are the cops? What race are they?
- What's the narrative of whiteness in Grand Theft Auto?
- Richard Wright talks about black people never being "allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it" (37). How does GTA reinforce the notion that black people have never been allowed to catch the spirit of Western civilization? How are they "in it" but not "of it" in GTA?
- What kind of power does this sort of narrative have over black players of the game? Over white players of the game?
- How are identities of "blackness" and "whiteness" constructed at our school?
- How are identities of "blackness" and "whiteness" constructed in U.S. society?
- Final thoughts?

After viewing the clips, students had some time to write down notes on the above questions. We then had a large group discussion around issues of the game, and then I collected their responses to the questions.

The Game

The opening sequence of the game shows CJ, the game's main character—a teenaged, black male—returning home after five years of "being away" because his mother died. There's nobody at the airport to pick him up, so he gets in a taxi and the game follows him on his drive home.

27 seconds into the game, scene two begins with CJ's taxi being pulled over by the police. Two white police officers pull their guns on CJ still in the taxi cab, and the only black police officer in the game (narrated by actor Samuel Jackson) steps out of the police car to speak to CJ. Hip hop music plays in the background. CJ is forced out of the taxi with his hands raised over his head. He walks backwards towards the cops until Samuel Jackson's character tells him to stop and get down on his knees, then lie down face first on the road, where he is handcuffed. We are now 50 seconds into the game. As the white cops frisk CJ, they confiscate a wad of cash from him and hand it over to Samuel Jackson—the game's only black cop happens to be crooked—who claims the money is "drug money." Samuel Jackson says, "Welcome home, Carl" to CJ, obviously recognizing him and "welcoming" him back to the neighborhood with an arrest. Samuel Jackson calls CJ "boy," as the white officers put him into the back of the police car, banging his head on the car frame as he bends down. The white cop yells to the Mexican taxi cab driver, "Get out of here, you greaseball!" and then says "Stupid Mexicans" to his colleagues. Despite CJ's pleas to get his bag out of the taxi, the police don't respond and the taxi drives away.

The third scene of the opening sequence has Samuel Jackson asking sarcastically how CJ's "wonderful family" is. CJ responds that he's home to bury his mother—something he claims Samuel Jackson knows. Samuel Jackson admits that he does and asks him what else he has "shaking." CJ declares definitively, "Nothing. I live in Liberty City now. I'm clean. Legit," to which Samuel Jackson responds, "Nah, you ain't never been clean, Carl." The police officers then show CJ a murder weapon that was just used to gun down a fellow police officer. They inform CJ, "You work fast, n[redacted]a!" and despite CJ's denials and reminders that he just got off the plane, the police officers continue to knowingly frame him for a crime he obviously didn't commit. We are two minutes and twenty-three seconds into the game. The police officers tell CJ they'll come find him when they "need" him and throw him from their moving vehicle into enemy gang territory.

As CJ walks towards an abandoned bicycle, he narrates to the players that he hasn't "represented" his gang in five years, but that the enemy gang "won't give a shit"—he obviously needs to get out of this neighborhood quickly. CJ earns points for stealing the bicycle and starting to ride. The game informs players to "follow the icon on the map to get CJ back to the 'hood." Some drivers of cars swear at CJ to "get off the road, dammit" as he pedals past them. CJ finally arrives back to his "hood" and walks into—presumably—his mom's house. He picks up a photograph of her off the floor and hears her nagging voice in his head to "Stop it Carl, what you doin'?" CJ seems disturbed at the memory and backs into another room, where a black

man holding a baseball bat starts yelling at him, "You pick the wrong house, fool!" Luckily for CJ, he knows this man, whose name, we learn, is "Big Smoke." Big Smoke recognizes CJ and hugs him with exclamations, "Oh, my dawg! Wazzup?" and asks how he's doing with the death of his mother. Big Smoke promises to find out who killed CJ's mom, and comforts him by saying, "The streets are cold, man. Like it says in the book, 'we are blessed *and* cursed.'" CJ says, "What fuckin' book?" And Big Smoke responds, "Same thing make us laugh, make us cry, but right now, we need to take care our bizness, go see your brother at the cemetery. Come on, let's bounce," and they leave the house. We are five minutes and thirty-seven seconds into the game.

Scene four opens with Big Smoke and CJ walking towards a grave at the cemetery with some people gathered around it. A black girl in a short cutoff jean skirt and green halter top stands up to hug CJ. CJ's brother accosts him for being gone for five years and for "running away from another funeral." The girl is frustrated by the boys fighting and storms off to CJ's brother yelling, "Where the fuck you goin'?" CJ's brother and the girl begin verbally fighting, and CJ steps in to break it up. She storms off and CJ's brother declares that "everything is fucked up." CJ's brother gives him a rundown of all of the crime and gang activity going on in the neighborhood—"people blastin' first, ask questions second." As CJ, his brother, and his friends walk away from the cemetery, a car full of rival gang members, "Ballers," drives by. Big Smoke yells, "Driveby--incoming!" as gunshots explode from the car. CJ and his friends dive to the ground, but the Ballers shoot up Big Smoke's car, making it undrivable. They run down the street yelling that they need to get home, that it's "too crazy 'round here." This is the end of the opening sequence, at seven minutes and thirty nine seconds.

To sum up, in the opening eight minutes of the game, CJ is arrested by a crooked black cop and two white cops who are committed to framing him for a murder he didn't commit. He speaks of his past history with drugs and gang violence. He steals a bicycle which he discards when he's done using it. He is attacked by a former friend wielding a bat in his own house, goes to his mother's gravesite where he fights with his brother and watches his brother fight with a scantily-clad girlfriend. He is told of the unending gang violence in his neighborhood, and he is the victim of a drive-by shooting. It is a full eight-minute introduction to the world of Grand Theft Auto.

Players go on to navigate CJ's world, where they realize that to be CJ—to be black in Grand Theft Auto—is to live a life of crime, violence, drugs, and poverty. CJ earns points for stealing things, fighting with people, driving people off the road with his own car, and hooking up with prostitutes. Students reported that in secret add-on versions of the game, CJ earns even more points for killing the prostitute after sleeping with her. He gains strength by eating food, but the amount of strength he earns is dependent on what type of food he eats. For example, if CJ eats pizza and pop, he gains energy, but moves more slowly and is a bit groggy. He earns the most strength by eating fried chicken and watermelon at the local fried chicken joint. His statistics as players navigate the game are based on strength, fitness, and respect. There is nothing about intelligence, morality, or wisdom. Essentially, CJ is evaluated in the game by the same criteria with which a slave would be evaluated on the trading block in the 1600's. Players are not told, in the opening sequence, how the game ends or what the "end goal" of the game really is.

The Statistics

The first two questions one student asked after viewing the opening sequence of the game were, "Who made this game?" and "Who plays it?" One white student raised her hand and said, "My older brother plays it, but you know, he doesn't play it for like, *those* reasons." My one black student in class responded, "Yeah, I mean, I've played it, but I never really thought about it like that." This opened the floodgate in class for students to start talking about how many of them had either played the game, or know people who play the game frequently. Every student in class had either played the game themselves, or had seen someone else play it. Statistically, this isn't all that unusual. In 2009, the Entertainment Software Association put out a report titled "Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry." According to their report, 68% of American households play games and 42% own their own gaming console. 49% of gamers are between the ages of 18 and 49, and 60% of them are male. In 2008, video and computer games grossed 11.7 billion dollars in sales. 63% of parents were reported to "believe games are positive part of their children's lives." Additionally, according to this report, Grand Theft Auto for the Xbox360 was the 5th best-selling game of 2008 *and* Grand Theft Auto for the PlayStation3 was the 8th best-selling game of 2008.

While this report offered a multitude of information about the demographics of gamers—what percentage of women purchased games but didn't play them, what percentage of people over 50 considered themselves gamers (26%!), what kinds of games people purchased—they did *not* list the racial demographics of gamers. I would be fascinated to know the racial breakdown of the game's creators, as well as game users. At times, I find myself wondering if the painfully stereotypical narrative of blackness presented in the game isn't satirical…how could it *not* be? But then, I wonder, what if it *isn't*? And even if it is, how are players responding to it—are they critical enough to realize it? My students, summarily, were not.

The Students

Student responses to the video game differed between the large group live discussion and their written responses. In class, students wanted to focus their analysis of the game on the video game genre and whether the game would incite people to violence. They were very comfortable going down the well-worn path of video game violence talk, even when I would try to steer the discussion back towards race. Even pointed redirections like, "I hear what you're saying about violence, but I'm interested in what kind of message you think this game sends players *about* race—about what it means to be black and what it means to be white" would generally fail to elicit in-depth discussion about race in the game. Even if a student would raise their hand to offer a specific example of race construction in the game, discussion would quickly veer back into comments about violence, language, or the thirty second scene of CJ's brother fighting with his girlfriend. It was clear, even in the middle of a race unit, even with explicit questions about race asked by their teacher, students would prefer NOT to talk about race.

Three major trends emerged from their written responses, however. In looking at the final reflection questions about race constructions at our school, in U.S. society, and the open-ended "final thoughts?" question, students typically wrote responses that fell into one of three categories, what I'm calling "The Affirmative," "Race doesn't matter…but it does" (Pollock) and "The Denial."

Comments in "The Affirmative" category are from students who stated unequivocally that they saw racism as a large part of our school and of U.S. society. They wrote things like, "Blacks are still seen as criminals and gang members—just like the game" and "Between the

kids there is racism based on the appearance of blacks and whites in the hallways." Another student wrote, "In U.S. society, whites seem to have control (politics) and rule over blacks (gang members, criminals, etc.) It's surprising how racist this game is." A white girl responded, "Well obviously there is no killing going on in school, but I mostly see white people hanging out with other white people and black people hanging out with other black people. Even though society says black people can't be discriminated against they still are." Many students commented on our school's open enrollment policy as a way race divided students: "Blacks and whites are still separated a lot. They bus in black kids from the city, but all the kids from the suburb are white." "Race is constructed at [our school] because the African-Americans from Minneapolis are not accepted by the white community of [the suburb]." While, of course, not every open enrolled student is black, nor is every "suburban kid" white, these stereotypes loom large in our hallways. (Teachers will even talk about kids that are "ours" and kids that "come to us" from "other places.") Students also blamed media for the continuation of many racial stereotypes. One girl wrote, "Games like these are why discrimination is so prominate [sic] in America."

The second type of response falls in the "Race doesn't matter—but it does" category. These comments typically started out by saying race and racism wasn't important, but then ended the sentence with an example of how race *does* actually matter a great deal. For example, "Whites and blacks are equal, but whites are more accepted and honored versus blacks not or hardly at all," or "Racism has really gotten a lot better but whites and blacks are still racist towards each other." A female student wrote, "I believe that everyone is treated equally at [our school] but some kids are racist and judgmental." Another wrote, "For the most part Black people and white people integrate, but there is always a racial gap present." Finally, my one black student wrote, "I don't think they really judge me on the color of my skin. But there are still stereotypes like oh, she's black, she has to be good at sports and stuff like that, but nothing that negative." This duality in student response was interesting. In one breath they would argue that race and racism didn't really exist, but then they'd give me an example of how it actually did. This kind of hedging seems to come from an unwillingness to and a discomfort in really taking a stand on an issue of race.

In the third category—The Denial—students argued that the U.S. was beyond issues of race and racism, and that racism wasn't present at our school. One wrote, "I don't think blackness and whiteness are constructed at [our school]." Another said, "Black president—racism is dead." Yet another, "I feel like we don't judge based on color…Grand Theft Auto is based on a complete stereotype that isn't real." Many students commented on the stereotypes employed in the game—this seemed to be their way *around* the issue of race, by marking it down as a "stereotype", they didn't view it as something they had to investigate or interrogate as "real."

The Virtual Black Face

I have pages of written student comments in response to the game, but Joey's comment to me as he was walking out of class that day about blowing off steam is the one that keeps gnawing at me. Initially, it bothered me that after an hour of close analysis, he wasn't distressed by the prevalent and pernicious messages of racism that were inherent in the game enough to refuse to ever play it again. I was disturbed that he still saw the game as sheer "entertainment"—as a way for him to relax, blow off some steam, and decompress from his day, as though the best way to relax after a tough day of being a white boy at a largely white school in a largely white community was to go pretend to be a black gangster from the "hood."

But then, that's the thought I couldn't shake. What if there really *was* something to this notion of white male gamers putting on "virtual black face" in the form of CJ to "blow off some steam" at the end of their day. I initially found the statistics on gamers because I was interested to see if the majority of gamers were white males, or if the majority of game creators were white males. I have yet to find those demographics. But if white males between the ages of 18 and 49 are making Grand Theft Auto the 5th best-selling video game of the year and spending 11.7 billion dollars annually on games, these games are obviously speaking to something very real, very complex, and very deeply embedded in their sense of self.

Thandeka writes about the draw of minstrelsy and black face for white immigrant workers as a way to express those aspects of their identity that they lost and that they missed the most. She writes, "Both the Euro-American worker and the immigrant worker thus found an image for the self their bosses loathed but the workers still loved: the self that would not fit into the routinized life it loathed but instead got drunk, went fishing, took relaxation breaks, and resisted its demise as best it could. Their attachment to the black image was a desire to recover feelings that for themselves as 'whites' were intolerable, but as prewhites were the hallmarks of their humanity: sensuality, sexuality, free play, the premodern home, whimsy, strutting, zipping, dashing, clowning, cooing, cooning" (69-70). Here, Thandeka argues that the draw for immigrant white men to minstrelsy is based in a desire to act out those elements of their identity that are now denied them—those parts of themselves and their culture that they had to "trade-in" in order to gain full participation in the white power structure of America. Through black face, these immigrant workers fighting for cultural and economic space in America, workers who were forced to deny elements of their own culture in order to gain such space, were allowed to once again enjoy elements of the life and culture they've left behind. I wonder if there aren't implications here for the young white males who enjoy playing this game as a way to relax. The narrative of whiteness presented in Grand Theft Auto is one of rule-enforcement through police, but as the player, you're positioned in opposition to that kind of rule, law, and order. You identify with CJ and earn points for doing everything *against* how you would "earn points" in the white majority of the "real world."

Additionally, Thandeka discusses the therapeutic role of minstrelsy: "White minstrelsy was a discharge of feeling for the audience and in this way served a psychotherapeutic function. 'Psychoanalysis,' as one contemporary theorist notes, 'whatever else we may wish to define it as, is the systematic attempt to help people discover and get back in touch with what they feel'" (71-72). This speaks exactly to what Joey was saying about using the game as a way to "blow off steam." He was looking for a discharge of feeling, or perhaps an escape to a world of which he's not really a part and never will actively be able to play a part. Positioning himself as CJ, then, is a white gamer's only virtual opportunity to explore this other world of "blackness," to which they feel undeniably drawn.

Finally, much of my students' vocal silence about race and racism evident in Grand Theft Auto is connected to Mica Pollock and her discussions of the silenced race talk at Columbus High School. She discusses what she calls the two central dilemmas of race talk as fear of being "inaccurate" or "inappropriate" (188). This fear of not "doing" race talk well is pervasive and real at all levels of education—I can hardly blame my 15 year old students for exhibiting that fear, as well. We are not good at talking about issues of race. We may be wounded individuals picking at a raw sore (Thandeka) or be struck mute at the system of public education hiding behind calls to educate "all" students and therefore ignoring the specific and varying needs of "some" (Pollock), but regardless, we are not yet good at this discussion. By further exploring

arenas of race and racism in the spheres of influence in which our students are operating—such as the video game Grand Theft Auto—perhaps we can more fully interrogate our students' and our own perceptions of race and racism, and the ways in which narratives of blackness and whiteness position us all.

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