

PEDAGOGY OF THE DEMONICALLY POSSESSED

*Critical Pedagogy and Popular Literature*¹

In his notable, if under-read, treatise *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson (1933) writes:

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (p. 84)

For Woodson, the way education plays a controlling force in the lives of a marginalized and oppressed group of Americans helps clearly articulate a legacy of racism and privilege that is at work in today's society still. As an avid reader of contemporary YA, however, I am struck by how Woodson's words are made manifest in the most popular of today's titles. Series like Veronica Roth's *Divergent* and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* play deliberately with plot conceits involving mind control. In particular, savvy and able-bodied youth are at the mercy of sinister adults to takeover or destroy the livelihood of many. Even in Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games* shadow government officials sway the actions of youth for large, power hungry plays at control. The controlling of a person's thinking is alive and well in the best selling titles of YA today.

And while I'm sure that Woodson never intended for his words to echo across the dystopian novels that are filling shelves in bookstores today, I see a powerful and transformative opportunity to help youth understand connections *across* these two different texts.

Careful and deliberate facilitation of YA discussions in classrooms can help foment a critical consciousness articulated by Woodson and other critical theorists. Popular and critically acclaimed books such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), for instance, teach powerful lessons of identity and civic participation when reinforced through transformative pedagogy. This chapter looks at opportunities to engage with YA literature in classrooms utilizing a critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2001) defines critical pedagogy as "an entry point in the contradictory nature of schooling, a chance to force it toward creating the conditions for a new public sphere" (p. 116). Looking at specific practices and using example texts, this chapter provides a theoretical framework for both critique and textual production using YA books in English classrooms.

WHO IS FREIRE AND WHY WOULD HE CARE ABOUT YA?

A discussion of critical pedagogy often begins in Brazil in the late 1960s. Working to teach a working class adult population to read, educator and theorist, Paulo Freire helped spark a revolution in ways to foment literacy and education. He framed reading, writing, and communicating as tools for a working class to wield and reshape the society around them. Writing in his now canonical text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first translated into English in 1970, Freire describes how social change through the teaching of literacy is not only possible, but a mandate for how critical educators must approach their craft. A pedagogical and theoretical perspective on education at large, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* may not seem like an immediate entry way into interpreting young adult literature. However, while many tend to see critical pedagogy as starting and ending with Freire, it is important to recognize the long-line of scholarship and critical thought that has preceded and followed the work of Freire. In *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth*, Ernest Morrell (2008) traces critical scholarship back to Socrates, an important reminder for educators and students alike to see the long line of shoulder-standing the field of education builds upon.

By definition, critical pedagogy is not a literary tool. It is, as suggested by its title, a pedagogy—a method and practice for teaching. Though it is often discussed in theoretical terms, critical pedagogy *should* be an approach that can be pragmatically applied in educational contexts. While I delineate my current understanding of critical pedagogy below, I do so with the express purpose of looking at intersections between teaching practice and young adult literature. How can literature be used to push forward an inclusive and contemporary critical pedagogy? How do some YA texts illustrate a critical pedagogy and opportunities for its application? Unlike *critical theory*, a critical pedagogy is not intended as a lens to scrutinize verbiage or themes; critical pedagogy is to be enacted and experienced and challenged.

In the abstract, critical pedagogy is not easy to pin down. Ira Shor (1992) characterized it as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse. (p. 129)

The sprawl of this definition can be a useful means to find myriad access points for classrooms, however it also makes delineating clear guidelines tricky. I would argue that while critical pedagogy shies away from decontextualized explanations, it is a responsive pedagogy that inverts power structures of marginalized voices in learning contexts. At the heart of critical pedagogy is the urge to not simply resist but also push against hegemonic ideology. For example Freire and Macedo (1987) explain: