INTRODUCTION

I (Ashley) first read Toni Morrison’s Beloved 20 years ago for summer reading as a high school senior in an AP literature course in Mobile, AL. I have vivid memories of two moments in that reading. First, when my teacher gave us a quiz, one student knew that Beloved had a red ribbon around her neck. My teacher told all of us that it was clear she was the one to have really read the novel. Second, I thought the novel must be a “good book” because it was so difficult to read – something my teacher said repeatedly. If I close my eyes, I can still see her drawing a picture of what looked like a hurricane on the board to describe its structure and I can hear her repeatedly discussing the concept of stream of consciousness. I am sure that my teacher had a number of goals beyond these for having her seniors read Beloved, but that is what I remember.

Fast forward and I can appreciate that my teacher included Beloved in her 1997 syllabus. Given the mostly White, male canon that continues to comprise high school reading lists (Borsheim-Black, 2012), the inclusion of Beloved, a still fairly new novel about slavery written by a Black woman, was surely controversial. Indeed, it continues to face censorship for its allegedly inappropriate discussions of such topics as racism, violence, sexual content, and bestiality (i.e. ALAN Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2017). Still, Beloved has taken its place in the canon of books sanctioned for inclusion in high school English. First, it has been cited on the AP Literature exam 13 times since 1990, the same number of times as The Great Gatsby and only three fewer times than The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn have been included on the exam since 1970 (Advanced Placement List of Novels Tested Since 1971). Moreover, when The New York Times asked authors to name the best fiction of the last 25 years, Beloved topped the list (Scott, 2006). It was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. Beloved, then, has been recognized repeatedly for its outstanding literary merit. Even how it is taught in schools emphasizes its canonicity. Much like my experience, a Google search for lesson plans to guide the teaching of Beloved emphasizes supporting students in making sense of the challenging structure and in identifying and analyzing symbols. A few lessons or units reference how the novel might help students make sense of the Civil War and its aftermath.
But *Beloved* is not just a work of art; it is, as Morrison says of herself in her forward to *Sula*, “highly political and passionately aesthetic” (p. xiii). In this article, then, we turn toward the political in *Beloved*. We consider Morrison’s work as a statement about “what ‘free’ could possibly mean to women…to the different history of Black women” (Morrison, 1973, p. xvi). Thus, we offer to secondary English teachers and students a critical race theory framework for analyzing *Beloved*. Given the current socio-political environment, an environment in which people question whether Black people have the right to say their lives matter, where there is documented evidence of a school-to-prison pipeline for Black and Brown children, where schools continue to fail children of Color, we believe critical race theory can help us think deeply about historical and present-day racism and injustice. Moreover, it provides a language for grappling with these issues in our classrooms even when they can be difficult to discuss.

While *Beloved* on its own can help us think through past and present racism, we believe pairing it with Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*, a contemporary young adult novel, allows teachers and students to think together about how racism persists in our society. Both novels explore how racism and White supremacy act on its victims and perpetrators, and taken together, they tell an American story that challenges dominant narratives of equality and racial progress.

**OUR PERSPECTIVES**

How does a reader of any race situate herself or himself in order to approach the world of a Black writer? Won’t there always be apprehension about what may be revealed, exposed about the reader? (from *Sula*, p. xii)

As two White, former secondary English teachers, we draw on this quote from Morrison’s forward to her novel *Sula* to recognize that conversations about race and racism can be difficult and complicated. There was apprehension for us as we set out to write this chapter, even as we felt drawn to it. We know there are likely better words to choose than we did here; yet we firmly believe that all of us must confront issues of racism in literature, ourselves, and our communities. Using critical race theory as a framework for thinking about what *Beloved* and *The Hate U Give* offer to us as readers is our effort to provide a tool for those teachers and students who want to enter the conversation.

**CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

With its foundation in legal studies in the 1970s, critical race theory (CRT) places race at the center of analysis (Bell, 1992). Education scholars including Ladson-Billings have used critical race theory to study how race, racism, and power influence the daily experiences of people of Color in educational systems (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2016). Scholars have also applied critical race theory to both canonical and contemporary fiction (i.e. Martin, 2014; Brooks, 2009;