

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Poetry
Two Poems
by MEH



DESIGNS FROM KIMONO PATTERN BOOKS (CA. 1902) SOURCE - INTERNET ARCHIVE - SMITHSONIAN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

when asked why I don't play well with others

I was asked to develop an antiracist workshop to address the white dis-ease—and over-ease—around use of “the N-word” in school. I made ready for progressive hand-wringing over silencing Black authors—strategic banning of *The Bluest Eye*, *Native Son*, and *Fences*, the need for smelling salts after reading only Dick Gregory’s title—all while *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *Huckleberry Finn* continue to burrow like a blood-drunk tick. I prepared comments on anthologies complicated by Agatha Christie and Flannery O’Connor, and the pitfalls of employing hip-hop as confessional poetry. I planned to discuss teachers who explode that linguistic grenade aloud in class, or play Russian roulette with round-robin readings, or designate Black students to knot the word around their throats (others who think Hispanic and southeast Asian kids will do in a pinch). I anticipated calls for academic freedom, assessing authorial intent, and combating “cancel culture” as the background radiation of the universe we’ll share for two and a half hours. but when I arrived, they were focused on curbing student culture. they had slapped repeated detentions on thirteen Black boys for their continued use of the word—with each other—in the hallways and the cafeteria. one young man was suspended for four days after referring to Hamlet’s delayed, futile revenge as “decidedly bitch ass nigga behavior” in an essay. they’re looking to me for recommendations on how to address this growing crisis.

when asked why nothing really surprises me anymore

once, while casually
searching the internet
for reporting about
an unfortunate incident
at my former place of work—
an affluent educational
institution—I Googled
my school's name
with the term "nigger."
I expected any number
of hits dismissed
by the community
over the years—
where the word
was sung
or hurled
or scrawled
or carved
or posted
or tweeted
or snapped—but
the first result
was an article
about me.

MEH is Matthew E. Henry, a multiple Pushcart nominated poet and short story writer. His works appear or are forthcoming in *Radical Teacher*, *Kweli Journal*, *Longleaf Review*, *Poetry East*, *Spillway*, *Rigorous*, *Rise Up Review*, and *3Elements Review*. MEH is an educator who received his MFA from Seattle Pacific University, yet continued to spend money he didn't have pursuing a M.A. in Theology and a PhD in Education.