

How Can We Expect Them to Stand Up in a Crooked Room?

Content Objectives

This year, my teaching journey took me to the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center School, a detention facility where male and female adjudicated youth await the next phases in their juvenile justice process. A number of factors make this experience unique from other teaching assignments. Foremost, the youth are residents within the facility and have no access to cellular phones or computers. Contact with family and friends is limited to letters and supervised visits and phone calls. Furthermore, the students' schedules are dictated by the facility as well as the staff. Finally, the tenure of students within a class can range from a few days for those who might have light offenses and possibly go home with supervision to more serious offenses which will require placement in a state facility which could take up to several months to find an open bed.

These unique factors make teaching a unit challenging. Without the guarantee of timeframes with students, starting a novel or long term project is not feasible. Similarly, without electronic resources that give students access to doing their own research, the ability to allow students choices to pursue their own interests in subject material is not a viable option. Additionally, being in the circumstances in which students find themselves, teachers find that it takes time and patience to build relationships and trust with students so that they can openly and authentically engage with students.

Students enter the facility with trauma and distrust. For many, they come from troubled circumstances in which their decisions were about survival. At some point, they end up here. For many, they will return multiple times before they exit the system. Their educations take place within the different residential institutions where they are placed, they never really get a chance to heal from the traumas they experienced or reconcile with their actions on the outside, their growth is stunted.

After reading the pieces within the TIP seminar, I decided that I would develop a themed unit geared towards the female classes that I teach. Because they tend to be more open when talking about themselves and eager to write about their life experiences, the assignments will be based around viewing several pieces: “Becoming”, the Netflix documentary about Michelle Obama, “Hidden Figures”, the story of three women of color who play a vital role in the space program at NASA in 1961, and “The Hate U Give,” the story of a young girl of color who is forced to deal with her friend’s death at the hands of a cop.

In order to give ourselves a lense through which we can view and speak about the situations in which the characters, and ultimately they themselves, are located, we will borrow the language of “the crooked room” as offered by Mellissa Harris-Perry in “Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America” in her discussion of Michelle Obama.

Let us begin this discussion with some background on the students in the juvenile justice system, highlighting some of the research and work being done to understand who is arriving in the system.

Startling Statistics

When signing up for this TIP seminar, Civil Rights and Cinema, my eyes immediately went to reading and viewing selections pertaining to mass incarceration. From previous work that I had done with students in traditional settings surrounding civil rights violations, I knew of some startling statistics about this population. According to “The Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights”:

Children in the criminal justice system are three to seven times more likely to qualify for special education courses than those not in the system. Over half of the students in the system are below the grade level equivalent for their age, and oftentimes many are illiterate. Moreover, 65-70% of these youth have a mental health disorder, and most of these youth have more than one; fewer than 10% of youth, however, with serious mental illness get sufficient treatment for it.

These numbers about the educational disadvantages of children within the juvenile justice system contribute to the educational trauma to which these students are continuously subjected. Due to falling behind in literacy and untreated mental health issues, many students were alienated from their educational journeys at early points in their lives and could not find a point to reenter the system. Anecdotally speaking, and with the acknowledgement that the center caters to children beginning at the age of thirteen, a number of students' attendance records and personal stories demonstrate that much of their educational careers have been spent in detention. Validating the point that once they enter the system, it is hard for them to get out, these observations also lend themselves to the notion that these students live within their "own crooked rooms." If an education is a way to equalize people's chances of pursuing the American Dream, we find a segment of the population who do not have the opportunity to start off on equal footing. Hence, their room is always crooked.

Middle School's Vulnerability

Middle school tends to be a vulnerable time for children in their development, even more so for students in the School District of Philadelphia. Their seventh grade standardized test scores are those that will determine the high school, magnet, citywide or neighborhood, to which they can attend meaning that the decisions they make in such an emotionally trying time will essentially last a lifetime. In a 2015 research study, authors, Jan N. Hughes, Myung Hee Im, and Paula J. Allee, published the "Effect of School Belonging Trajectories in Grades 6 - 8 on Achievement". Their findings state:

Specifically, at a developmental period when youth desire increased autonomy and experience, a heightened sensitivity to peers' reactions to them, the middle school context period provides less choice over academic tasks, an enhanced focus on competition, a larger and more diverse peer context and increased demands for organization and planning skills. Furthermore, as students move from elementary to middle school, they report less availability of adults to provide support and guidance in meeting with these challenges. (pg. 494)

Consistent with the stage-environment fit model to the degree that middle school students perceive low levels of teacher emotional support and autonomy and an

emphasis on grades and competition, they report lower liking for and sense of belonging to school. (pg. 494)

Ultimately, this research suggests that middle school students have great needs in order to grow academically and emotionally. Unfortunately, this also is the period when young people feel least supported by the adults around them. If they don't feel accepted by their peers, trouble can arise. Coincidentally, this age is also the age at which placement into a detention facility can begin.

Thus far, we have established that students who experience peer and adult alienation can find themselves in trouble, possibly within detention. We also recognize that a high population of students within detention facilities suffer from learning disabilities and are often below grade level in academics.

Where the vulnerable end up

In addition to the complications that arise from lack of educational and emotional support that can lead to trouble and detention, another troubling factor that contributes to the likelihood of a child getting into trouble is a history of abuse. According to the article, "Characteristics of Victims of Sexual Abuse by Gender and Race in a Community Corrections Population," the offender population has higher rates of sexual abuse in their past. Additional findings published in that same article state that a history of sexual abuse has been linked to suicide attempts, drug abuse (leading to additional instances of victimization), antisocial behavior and self-mutilation. Furthermore, sixty percent of females within the the juvenile population that were surveyed reported having been raped or threatened with rape, and higher incidences of PTSD. Other aspects of this research are even grimmer for certain segments of the population: "childhood sexual abuse has been documented to occur at a higher rate for African American children." The addition of this research to our discussion reinforces the idea of the existence of the "crooked room." When children experience abuse, the healing of that trauma should be a society priority. Instead, the victims end up in prison as we will discuss later in this paper with the Cyntoia Brown story.

Mass Incarceration: Work like this has been done before

Much like the Teaching Institute of Philadelphia, Yale National Institute hosts seminars where teachers come together to develop curricula around a particular theme. In 2018, teachers tackled Mass Incarceration. Of all of the curriculum coming out of that institute, one title stood out for the positive approach the developer was taking. In “Equipping Students with Tools for Positive Change,” Trace Lynne Ragland designs her lessons around empowering the students. Working with a population that is struggling academically, she articulates the need to not just engage them intellectually but to affect change. The approach she takes is to have students research rates of poverty and crime in their areas, she will then offer materials about individuals who have overcome obstacles. The students must then write informative essays discussing strategies they would use to change what they see around them. Furthermore, they must come up with an actionable plan that could be implemented from their viewpoint.

This particular curriculum grabs one’s attention because it takes an holistic approach to the societal problems young people face, addressing their social, emotional and academic needs. The curriculum to be found within this unit attempts to do the same.

Why focus on the girls?

A few factors contributed to me deciding to focus my curriculum on the girls in detention. Foremost, an interaction with a male student at PJJSCS where he stated: “I don’t want to get involved with girls here. They’re supposed to be better than us, not getting locked up like us” made me curious about how even the boys, who are in similar circumstances, judge the girls so harshly. The second factor had to do with my experiences with the girls. Through sharing their writing pieces with adults, they showed how eager they are to engage in work that helps them deal with their emotions and their development.

Another factor had to do with the weight of the girls’ stories. As stated above, many of the residents in detention centers are victims of sexual violence. Two news stories, one here in Philadelphia and one from California, bring to life the stories of girls caught up in sexual exploitation and detention.

While working at PJJSCS a news story flashed across television stations and social media loudly: a beloved cat caretaker and military veteran was murdered in his home. Video camera stills

captured images of an African- American woman in his home. Those images were shared across social media by crime fighters and animal activists. Soon, we all learned that the suspect was a 14-year-old girl. On one hand, this girl was a cold-blooded killer. On the other hand, people questioned why a young African-American girl was in the home of a 63-year-old white, Army veteran at 10pm at night. Furthermore, how could this girl possibly overtake, tie up and kill a man of his size?

This story was all too similar to that of Cyntoia Brown, a girl whose life had been the subject of documentaries since her teenage years. Currently, Netflix is airing one such documentary: “Murder to Mercy: The Cyntoia Brown Story”, the story of a sixteen-year-old runaway forced into prostitution by her 24-year-old boyfriend. One August night in 2004, a man picked Cyntoia up at a Sonic restaurant known to be a hangout for prostitutes. This 43-year-old man, John Allen took Cyntoia back to his house where he was murdered. Cyntoia is the only person who can relay the details of what happened that night but she tells the story of how Allen grabbed her intimately and she feared for her life because of the way he spoke and the amount of guns he had in his house. She claims she feared for her safety and shot him out of self-defense. She was tried as an adult and sentenced to life in prison, requiring 51 years of time served before she could be eligible for parole. Thanks to an earlier documentary and social media interest, Brown’s cause attracted the attention of higher profile attorneys as well as celebrities. With arguments made about the effects of her mother’s alcohol abuse and the fetal alcohol syndrome from which Cyntoia suffered along with the argument that Cyntoia was the victim of abuse as well as letters from people who knew Cyntoia and her evolution, the Governor granted Brown clemency and her sentence was reduced. She was released from prison at 32-years-old having attained her high school diploma along with her Associate’s Degree.

Not all of these stories elevate to those of the news stories. However, having taught in public schools for fifteen years, one sees how hard it is for female students to navigate circumstances that they know are wrong but lack the language and tools to empower them.

During the height of the Me Too movement as female actresses spoke up about Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults and other celebrities were losing their jobs over sexually charged comments, I witnessed groups of middle school children trying to navigate this territory.

"XXXX said something about sucking him..." or "Ms. Hastings, you don't hear what he's saying..." were the violent outbursts that came from a group of girls who were the targets of boys' remarks. . They were right, I did not hear what was being said but the most vocal of these girls told me that they had complained to the principal and counselor many times over the years. Nothing was done to stop the behaviors. And, typically, since the girls' behaviors were those that were the loudest and most aggressive, they would be the ones who were punished.

The third factor that shaped the scope of this curriculum arose during the seminar itself. A chapter from "Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America" by Melissa Harris-Perry , which focused on Michelle Obama's humanity and role as wife to the first black President of the United States, helped put into perspective the true difficulty that even the most clean cut of black women faced in this world. Harris-Perry articulated the language of the "crooked room" which we will be using to discuss Michelle Obama and the three main characters in "Hidden Figures" and the main characters in "The Hate U Give."

Within this idea of the crooked room is this idea that no matter what Michelle Obama did she would be criticized. Despite how her and Barack Obama's relationship was scandal free, commentators used derogatory terms to describe their relationship:

Because Michelle Obama seemed to fit neatly within the American racial framework, she was readily subjected to the distorting images of the crooked room. For example, there were attempts to frame her with the common trope of hypersexuality. In the heat of the general election fight, Fox News referred to her as "Barack's baby mama". (pg. 273)

Hence, this characterization stole levels of respect from her wherein she was not viewed as an equal.

Another way in which Michelle Obama's situation within the crooked room arose was when commentators delved deeply into her studies. Michelle Obama graduated from Princeton but spoke about how she felt alienated from the campus based on her race and her family's history of slavery.

Yet when this paper was made public, many in the media questioned whether Michelle Obama harbored resentments and hatred toward white people, white institutions, and America in general. Few questioned the veracity of her claims; instead, her complaint alone was enough to label her as angry. Some clearly believed that as a black girl from "inner city" Chicago, she should have been unreservedly grateful for the opportunity to

study at Princeton, and any discomfort or criticism must necessarily be irrational and angry. (pg. 276)

As the text points out, no one questioned the room and whether racism really existed and how the university could be made more accessible to girls of color. Instead, they went to the girl of color and attacked her for noticing something was wrong.

The crooked room got applied when the media discussed her physical features. From one reporter saying Michelle Obama "...got back" to another suggesting that Michelle Obama should cover up when the President is making speeches because men are distracted by temptations.

Finally, the crooked room comes from within the race as well in how comedians denounced the idea of a black First Lady as extolling strength enough to steal the power in the relationship and the government. From a Chris Rock skit:

Barack has a handicap the other candidates don't have: Barack Obama has a black wife. And I don't think a black woman can be first lady of the United States. Yeah, I said it! A black woman can be president, no problem. First lady? Can't do it. You know why? Because a black woman cannot play the background of a relationship. Just imagine telling your black wife that you're president? "Honey, I did it! I won! I'm the president!" "No, we the president! And I want my girlfriends in the Cabinet. I want Kiki to be secretary of state! She can fight!" (pg. 288)

Hence, the crooked room gets reinforced through people within their own community.

In material Monique Morris has put out into the world, we get an understanding of how the crooked room starts early in life. Publishing "Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools" in 2016, Morris's material became the basis for a documentary as well as her TedTalk. Within the TedTalk, "Why black girls are targeted for punishment in schools - and how to change that" Morris quotes several studies to illustrate her point that black girls have an unfair disadvantage in their educational journeys:

- Black girls are overrepresented along the entire continuum of discipline in schools
- Black girls are 7x more likely than their white peers to be suspended and 3x more likely to be referred to juvenile court than their white and Latinx peers
- Black girls experience a specific type of age compression where they are seen as more adult like than their peers
- People perceive black girls to need less nurturing, less protection, to know more about sex and to be more independent than their white peers.

- The perception disparity begins when girls are as young as 5-years-old
- Believing a girl is older than she is can lead to harsher treatment, immediate censure when she makes a mistake, and victim blaming when she is harmed.
- It can also lead a girl to believe that there is something wrong with her rather than the conditions in which she finds herself.

All of these points combined lead to the last point which connects the crooked room to her language “something wrong with the conditions in which she finds herself.”

To go from talking about the attention paid to Michelle Obama and then to the ways in which girls are pushed out of their education because they are viewed as too loud or too aggressive to realizing how little attention gets paid to the loss of life in their community would seem ironic. Using data published in 2016, the February 2020 article, “Crimes Against Blacks, Women Still Underreported in the Media”, discusses how the homicide rate for people of color, especially women, is higher per 100,000 than other populations. Furthermore, this article states:

While homicide is a leading cause of death for all women under 44, the CDC found non-Hispanic black women are “disproportionately affected” when compared to other racial groups in the United States. In fact, the homicide rate for black and Native American women was twice that of Asian, Hispanic and white women.

The startling details of these homicides are:

National Violent Death Reporting System between 2003 and 2014, and found at least 55.3 percent of female homicides were related to intimate partner violence, in which a victim was killed by her current or former partner or caught in the crossfire of an intimate partner homicide.

Additionally:

In a recent report, the Justice System Advocate for the Domestic Violence & Child Advocacy Center cautioned that African-American women are less likely to contact domestic violence service providers or call police when they’re abused, thus increasing their risk of being killed, in part because they are often fearful of reinforcing racial stereotypes that the black community is violent.

While we can never really know if the reason behind not seeking help has to do with the stereotypes, we must wonder if the lack of name assignment and reporting within stories has a

psychological impact on girls. Are they even viewed as important? Does the media contribute to the idea of their invisibility?

Comparing high publicity news stories like that of Natalie Holloway, the young white woman killed in the Bahamas, to the lack of stories publicized about women of color, the writers state:

What is the role of the media in reporting these matters? Is it simply clickbait for revenue purposes? Or is there a broader principle at issue? The protections afforded the media by the First Amendment suggest that it plays a critical role as the Fourth Estate by reporting matters of public importance. The disparity in reporting on racial grounds indicates that the media is no longer prioritizing the latter function. We believe the media should consider whether it is fulfilling its role and if not, take steps to address it.

<https://www.law.com/ctlawtribune/2020/02/21/crimes-against-blacks-women-still-underreported-in-media/?slreturn=20200230144614>

When we think about the invisibility of girls of color in the media, we should also consider research that argues that girls of color are left out of the conversation when the “prison to pipeline” arises.

Standards:

CC.1.3.9-10.C Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CC.1.2.9-10.E Analyze in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text.

CC.1.2.9-10.D Determine an author’s particular point of view and analyze how rhetoric advances the point of view.

CC.1.5.9-10.A Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CC.1.5.9-10.B Evaluate a speaker’s perspectives, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CC.1.5.9-10.C Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CC.1.5.9-10.D Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning; ensure that the presentation is appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Teaching Strategies

Journal entries - Based on a supplemental workbook published from Michelle Obama's "Becoming", we will use these prompts to uncover some personal thoughts. These will be freewriting exercises and available to be done whenever extra time remains. The girls will be supplied with a list of these prompts to do on their own or when we have free time in the classroom.

Image/photograph analysis - So many of the challenges girls of color face are based on people's perspectives of them, we want to think deeply about what we see when we look at pictures. What kinds of judgments arise for us?

Discussions - Much of the analyses we will be doing with the movies will be done so through speaking. Students will earn participation grades.

Movie Analysis - We will watch at least two movies to analyze the portrayal of certain characters and the situations within which they find themselves.

Choice Boards - Acknowledging that students express themselves differently, the choices that are offered in the culminating projects section offer a variety of modes to apply the knowledge students have learned.

Lesson Plans

These plans are designed to last ten to twelve 60 minute periods depending upon how one needs to modify some of the materials to increase student engagement.

Objectives

Students will be able to read different texts to identify the central idea and apply that idea to different textual situations.

Students will be able to identify an author's point of view and apply that to different media situations.

Students will be able to analyze different texts and videos in order to understand the complexity of ideas.

Materials

Excerpts from Chapter 7 of “Sister Citizen”, Movie Clips that highlight tense moments (for this course, the chosen movies are: Hidden Figures and The Hate U Give), Writer’s Notebooks, Excerpts from “Becoming” by Michelle Obama, Netflix documentary clips or whole: “Becoming”, Prompts from “Becoming: A Guided Journal for Discovering Your Voice”

Day #1

Do Now: A quick Google search defined FAIRNESS as: The quality of making judgments that are free from discrimination. Judges, umpires, and teachers should all strive to practice fairness. UNFAIRNESS was defined as a lack of equality and justice.

What would you add to either of these definitions? What examples would you provide to this discussion that would show that fairness or unfairness was demonstrated?

School, Work, Government, Family, Life.

Lesson: We will read excerpts from “Sister Citizen” to understand the challenging situations into which Michelle Obama was put. We will also use these excerpts to establish the language of the crooked room so that we can apply the theory to the movie clips we will be watching.

Create an anchor chart that reminds students of the language that comes with “crooked room” theory.

Exit Tickets: Students will write an objective summary of the material we read and put the language of the “crooked room” theory into their own words.

Day #2

Do Now/Quickwrites: Picture comparison: Guiding questions: What do we notice about the photo versus the portrait? Based on what we read yesterday, could any of the choices about the portrait and the legacy Michelle Obama will leave be based on the comments about her body?

1. Still life photo of Michelle Obama in the White House
2. National Portrait Gallery - First Lady Michelle Obama - President Portrait of Michelle Obama displayed in the Smithsonian

Lesson: Depending on where we arrived in our reading and discussion the day prior, we will continue with our reading and examination of Michelle Obama. There is a clip within Michelle Obama’s Netflix commentary, “Becoming,” that focuses on the

very same situations featured in the article. We will view this clip to compare how Michelle Obama discusses those situations versus how they were used in the article.

Exit Ticket: Free write of thoughts on this. There's a lot of material to process about the combination of these pictures, the portrayals of Michelle Obama and even what Mrs. Obama says about herself. What came up for students from this?

Day #3 - #5

Do Nows & Exit Tickets will be key components :

As we view these clips, we will apply the theory of the "crooked room" to the scenes. We will both write about and discuss them.

"Hidden Figures" Day #1 clips will include: 3:20 - Dorothy, Katherine and Mary are stuck on the side of the road when a police officer happens upon them; 14:00 - Mary's shoe gets stuck en route to her assignment; 27:28 - Dorothy's inquiry about becoming a supervisor; 20:30 - Katherine starts her computer job

"Hidden Figures" Day #2 clips include: 33:35 - Mary's husband arguing about her going for the engineering job; 44:05 Redacted information; 47 - Denial of Mary's application to become an engineer; 49 - 50:56 - Dorothy steals a book; 1:02 - Katherine's restroom rage

Hidden Figures Day #3 clips include: 1:08 - Good luck, gentleman; 1:08 - Good work, gentlemen; 1:10 - Mary wins; 1:20 - Katherine wants to get into the meeting; 1:31:24 Mary starts school; 1:33:52 - Dorothy revisits supervisor position

Wrap Up Activity for the movie:

Letter writing activity - Choose one character from the movie to whom you will write a letter. In this letter, you need to fully explain what the "crooked room" theory is and how that character got caught up in it. Then, you should offer that character some life advice.

Day # 6 - Day #8

"The Hate U Give" - Day #1 of 3- We will watch clips and apply the language of the "crooked room" to the characters' situations and the plot. Some of those scenes from the first third of the movie include the beginning when Maverick explains interactions with police and the ten point system to his family (How should we look at Starr's mom in this?), 6:17 - Starr describes her neighborhood's high school experience; 7:00 - Starr's self-described transition from Starr Version 1 and Starr Version 2; 13:44 - The party with Kenya

"The Hate U Give" Day #2 of 3 - We will watch additional clips to discuss the "crooked room" theory and how it applies to the characters and plot. Some of these clips include: 30:15 - the Police interview; 34:09 - Maverick & Starr's conversation

about Starr's name; 37:20 - Family's discussion about officer's charges; 40:23 - Kenya and Starr at the diner; 42:00 - Starr & Dad in King's car; 45:30: Starr's mom and dad argue about moving

"The Hate U Give" Day #3 of 3 - We will watch additional clips to discuss the "crooked room" theory and how it applies to the characters and plot. Some of these clips include: 51:25 - Khalil's funeral; 56:25 - First protest; 1:04:00 - Starr's friends protest; 1:30:10 Prom, shooting at Carter home, Maverick returns home; 1:43:08 - Iyesha and her crooked room

Choose one character from either movie to whom you will write a letter. In this letter, you need to fully explain what the "crooked room" theory is and how that character got caught up in it. Then, you should offer that character some life advice.

Culminating project choices:

1. Utilizing ideas gathered during our writing assignments, write a personal narrative of who you are "Becoming" using at least 3 topics from journal entries (example; self-care, happiness, people who invested in you).

Grading Checklist:

1. Introduction: _____
2. 3 journal entry topics: _____
3. At least 5 paragraphs: _____
4. Grammar and Mechanics: _____

2. The Crooked Room Perspective: Create an artistic representation of what the crooked room looks like to you. This can be a drawing, a collage, a painting, or any other representation but viewers must be able to locate the crooked room. Similarly, when asked you must be able to explain how it relates to the crooked room theory.

Grading Checklist

1. Creativity: _____
2. Reference to crooked room theory: _____
3. Verbal explanation: _____

3. Letters to and from Michelle Obama: With this choice, you will write a letter to Michelle Obama about any subject matter that you choose. You will then imagine you are Michelle Obama writing back to you. This is like the personal narrative in that it should be personal, but in more of a conversational tone. The combined length of the letters should be 5 - 6 paragraphs (3 each).

Grading Checklist

1. Two letters: _____
2. Conversational tones: _____

3. Grammar and Mechanics: _____

4. The UnCrooked (or Ideal) Room Perspective: Create an artistic representation of what the uncrooked (or ideal) room looks like to you. This can be a drawing, a collage, a painting, or any other representation but viewers must be able to crooked room. Similarly, when asked you must be able to explain how it relates to the crooked room theory.

Grading Checklist

1. Creativity: _____
2. Reference to crooked room theory: _____
3. Verbal explanation: _____

Resources

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Reading and Viewing List for Students

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Hidden Figures. Directed by Theodore Melfi, performances by Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, and Janelle Monae. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2016.

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Resource - List of Journal Prompts from Michelle Obama's "Becoming: A Guided Journal for Discovering Your Voice"

During any down time you may have in the classroom, you can use it to complete prompts from here. Feel free to complete any of these prompts on your own time as well. Each should be at least 5 - 7 sentences and will be worth 10 points. You must complete at least 7 (x 10 points each = 70 or "C") to get one grade. Any additional completed prompts above 10 (or a score of 100) will be extra credit.

Sample prompt and response:

What kind of person do you want to become?

Checklist (Where your five to seven sentences should come from): 1. Introduction _____
2. Material for prompt (does it make sense, does it seem genuine?): _____ 3. 5 - 7
sentences: _____ 4. Grammar and Mechanics: _____

When I think of the person I want to become, I acknowledge that I spend a lot of time thinking about this. I have wasted a lot of time lacking confidence and feeling doubts about myself. Those feelings caused me to make decisions and be around people who just weren't good for me. I stopped growing and being true to myself. As I got older, I learned to recognize when I am being true to myself. My voice just feels better. I want to become the type of person who acts more from the confident place not from the fearful, doubtful place. I'd like to become the kind of person who does not spend so much time overthinking things I've said or done. I want to be sure I'm focusing my energy in places that are within my truthful space.

If you don't see that your story matters, chances are no one else will either. So even though it isn't easy, it's important for you to find the strength to share your truth. Because the world needs to hear it.

1. What's your story and how have you learned to embrace it?
2. Where did your story take a turn?
3. Do you have any favorite quotes? Share three of them here.
4. Describe your proudest moment in the fullest detail possible. Or, if you don't feel like you've lived that day yet, describe the moment you think will give you the most pride.
5. Write ten things you want for yourself.
6. I had nothing or I had everything. It depends on which way you want to tell it. Where we come from has such a strong effect on the person we are. Describe the neighborhood where you grew up. What was special about it? What was challenging? How did it shape who you are today?
7. Describe your childhood home. What are some details that stand out the most? What made your home different from your friends' homes?
8. If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's the power of using your own voice. Write about a time when you spoke your truth to others? How did it make you feel? What did you learn?
9. What kind of person do you want to become?

10. How do you want to contribute to the world? What is one small step you can take to further that contribution?

There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there's grace in being willing to know others. This, for me, is how we become.

11. Have courage this month to share a little more of your story with someone else. Ask them about theirs. What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about this person?

12. What are the greatest lessons you learned as a child?

13. Describe your perfect day—beginning with breakfast and ending with dinner.

14. Write a letter to your younger self, giving advice and revealing what the future holds.

15. Write a letter to your future self, outlining your expectations for the years to come.

I was female, black, and strong, which to certain people, maintaining a certain mind-set, translated only to "angry." It was another damaging cliché, one that's been forever used to sweep minority women to the perimeter of every room, an unconscious signal to listen to what we've got to say.

16. Have you ever felt like a cliché, or stereotype? How did you react?

17. What was the last great book you read? What did you learn from it?

18. List ten fun things you like to do.

19. What is your most prized possession and how did you come to own it?

20. Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. It's vulnerability that breeds with self-doubt and then is escalated, often deliberately, by fear. What can you do as an individual or community member to help break a cycle of fear and failure?

21. Who is the happiest person you know? What do you think brings them joy?

22. In seeking out new perspectives and reaching outside of our comfort zones, we can discover more about ourselves. If you could travel anywhere, where would you go and what would you do?

23. Think back to when you would visit grandparents or other elders. Capture one specific memory from those visits in the fullest detail possible, including the sights, sounds and smells.

24. How have those elders left a mark on you?

25. List five people who have invested in you since you were a child.

26. Choose one person from that list and describe how that person's investment helped you.

27. Who was the most influential teacher in your life? How did this person leave such a strong impression?

I have a habit that has sustained me for life: keeping a close and high-spirited council of girlfriends - a safe harbor of female wisdom.

28. List three people who contribute to your circle of strength. Next to each person's name, describe why he or she is so dependable.

29. Create a playlist of ten songs that you could listen to on repeat.

I've learned that it's harder to hate close up.

30. Describe a recent conversation you had with someone who did not share your history or perspective. How did you navigate the conversation?

31. What kind of childhood did your parents or grandparents have? How is it different from or similar to your own?

32. Your story is the most powerful part of who you are—the struggles, failures, successes and everything in between. Remember always to stay open to new experiences and never let the doubters get in the way.

33. List ONE struggle, one failure, and one success from your life. What did you learn from each?

34. How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?

35. Becoming requires equal parts patience and strength. Describe a time when patience and strength contributed to your self-love/growth.

36. Write about a specific experience when someone dislodged a dream of yours by trying to lower your expectations. How did it make you feel? How did you try to overcome that obstacle?

37. List five ways that person was wrong.

38. When was your last good cry and how did you feel afterwards?

39. How do you look after yourself after you've had a bad day?

40. A transition is exactly that - a passage to something new. What transition are you going through right now? Do you feel ready for it?

41. How have your beliefs changed over the years? How have they remained the same?

42. Everyone on earth is carrying around an unseen history, and that alone deserves some tolerance. What major historical events affected your family—whether in the distant past or more recently?

43. What role does religion or spirituality play in your life?

44. Write about a time when you felt carefree.

45. Write about a time when you felt carefree.

Am I good enough? Yes, I AM.

46. List ten reasons you are a special and worthy person.

47. Write a thank you letter to someone you love.

48. How do you connect with your community?

49. List five changes you wish a civic leader would take on that would greatly affect your community for the better.

50. List your greatest gifts. Remember to embrace them and lay them on the table with pride.

51. How do you define leader? Have you ever viewed yourself as a leader?

Self-doubt doesn't make the feelings any less difficult in the moment, but in the end, it can actually be useful, as long as we don't let it overwhelm the way we think about ourselves.

52. What worries about yourself have you had that proved to be untrue? What methods do you use when faced with self-doubt?

So many of us go through life with our stories hidden, feeling ashamed or afraid when our whole truth doesn't live up to some established ideal...that is until someone dares to start telling that story differently.

53. Describe someone you know who was brave enough to tell their story. How did it change your perception of them? How did it change your perception of yourself?

54. What trailblazer throughout history has shaped you the most? If you could meet this person, what questions would you ask?

55. What legacy do you want to leave behind?

We were planting seeds of change, the fruit of which we might never see. We had to be patient.

56. List five tiny victories you accomplished.

If you don't get out there and define yourself, you'll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others.

57. How have others tried to define you in the past and how do their perceptions differ from the person you know you are?

58. How have you been able to create change in the lives of other people?

59. If you were asked to give a speech at a graduation, what advice would you give to the graduates?

60. Write about the last moment you remember being truly at peace. Where were you? What were you doing? How can you tap into that again?

61. List the five most important social issues you feel need attention to.

62. Who or what are you grateful for?

63. How do you express your gratitude?

64. How do you stay centered?

65. What inspires you?

The most successful people I know have figured out how to live with criticism, to lean on people who believe in them, and to push onward with their goals.

66. Reflect on one person you know how has overcome obstacles to accomplish their goals. How do you think they did it? What have you learned from their journey?

67. Describe a time when you had to speak up for yourself. What gave you the courage? What stood in your way?

Resource:

Excerpts from Chapter 7

Harris-Perry, Melissa. "Michelle," in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011): 269-30

Instead I want to employ her public persona as a way to summarize the claims I have made throughout this book. I have chosen Michelle Obama because she is the most visible contemporary example of an African American woman working to stand straight in a crooked room. The success and difficulty she has experienced in gaining accurate recognition is emblematic, if not typical, of black women's citizenship struggles. (pg 271)

Her life, while exceptional, was a far more familiar story for a black American. She was raised on the South Side of Chicago, had opportunities to study at prestigious universities, returned to her hometown, where she worked for government and educational institutions, married, and raised a young family. Unlike Barack, Michelle has two black parents and a black sibling, and she comes from a city readily associated with black life and politics. She has a family tree that traces back to American slavery. (pg. 272)

Michelle Obama's family history—from slavery to Reconstruction to the Great Migration north—connects her to the essence of the African American experience."Even the international press weighed in the day after the election: the Times of London commented, "Michelle Obama's ancestors suffered slavery, segregation and humiliation. Her heritage embodies a dark past many would rather forget." (pg. 273)

Because Michelle Obama seemed to fit neatly within the American racial framework, she was readily subjected to the distorting images of the crooked room. For example, there were attempts to frame her with the common trope of hypersexuality. In the heat of the general election fight, Fox News referred to her as "Barack's baby mama." Baby mama is a derogatory term for the mother of children born outside of marriage; it usually implies that the woman is difficult and bothersome to the children's father—thus the slang phrase "baby mama drama." Many commentators found this reference to Mrs. Obama appalling, denounced Fox News, and elicited an apology. While Fox News has earned a reputation as particularly virulent on issues involving the Obama family, their characterization of Michelle Obama was not motivated by political opposition alone: it was rooted in the specific history of shaming black women as sexually immoral. In reality, of all the major players in the 2008 presidential campaign, the Obamas had the most traditional, least controversial sexual history. (pg. 273 - 274)

Only Michelle and Barack were in a scandal-free, traditional first marriage, raising the biological children born of and in that marriage. Yet it was Michelle who was derided as a "baby mama." It

is the negative myths surrounding black women in America that allowed some commentators to feel they were licensed to deploy such a wildly inaccurate term. (pg. 274)

Michelle Obama's family history—from slavery to Reconstruction to the Great Migration north—connects her to the essence of the African American experience.⁷ Even the international press weighed in the day after the election: the Times of London commented, “Michelle Obama's ancestors suffered slavery, segregation and humiliation. Her heritage embodies a dark past many would rather forget.”⁸ Because Michelle Obama seemed to fit neatly within the to them, I will always be black first and a student second.”⁹ Her analysis, though unsophisticated, is compelling and steeped in her frustrated effort to gain recognition. It resonates with the struggle we have seen as representative for black women throughout American history. Yet when this paper was made public, many in the media questioned whether Michelle Obama harbored resentments and hatred toward white people, white institutions, and America in general. Few questioned the veracity of her claims; instead, her complaint alone was enough to label her as angry. Some clearly believed that as a black girl from “inner city” Chicago, she should have been unreservedly grateful for the opportunity to study at Princeton, and any discomfort or criticism must necessarily be irrational and angry. The results that have emerged throughout this book suggest that Michelle Robinson was most likely responding to Princeton University as a crooked room where securing recognition was difficult. The angry black woman label was most severely applied after Michelle Obama said, during a campaign stop in Milwaukee, that “for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback.” This comment became fodder for opposition speculation about her latent anger. She was a forty-four-year-old mother of two who earned a significant salary and held degrees from Princeton and Harvard—yet she was never previously proud of her country? Again, her critique was taken as evidence of her irrational anger. If her criticism of Princeton University was seen as revealing an inappropriately racialized psychology rather than the university's institutionally discriminatory practices, her pride comment was received as evidence of her lack of patriotism rather than as cause for reconsidering the nation's racial history. Every time she pointed out that the angles of the room were crooked, the nation seemed to shout back that she, not the room, was askew. The July 21, 2008, cover of the New Yorker captured the growing characterization of Michelle Obama as an angry black woman. It depicted Barack and Michelle Obama as fist-bumping terrorists. An American flag burned in the fireplace of the oval office, Osama bin Laden's picture hung over the mantel, and Barack was dressed in traditional North African apparel. Michelle was shown in military gear and combat boots with an AK-47 slung across her back and her hair in a large, curly Afro. The cover outraged many, but magazine spokespersons repeatedly denied that their depiction was anything other than a satirical jab at those who had inaccurately characterized the couple as a radical threat to American democracy. Whatever the intent, it captured a particular sentiment about Michelle. Although Barack Obama had been photographed in similar attire during a trip to Africa, Michelle has never styled her hair in a large Afro, been heavily armed, or worn military gear. The New Yorker's representation of her was not derived from visual evidence but from an ideological perspective about her. As is often the case in the crooked room, anger was an easy default framework for interpreting Michelle. (pg. 274 - 276)

The licentious discussions about Michelle centered not on her sexual behavior but on her physical body. Interestingly, one of the most profane came from Erin Aubry Kaplan, an African American woman writing for Salon who gushed with ecstatic familiarity, "First Lady Got Back!" Kaplan wrote of the First Lady's posterior, "It is a solid, round, black, class-A boo-tay. Try as Michelle might to cover it with those Mamie Eisenhower skirts and sheath dresses meant to reassure mainstream voters, the butt would not be denied." Only because it was written by an African American woman, whose identity shielded her from being labeled racist or sexist, was this article publishable in the mainstream media. But it still set off a firestorm, particularly among black feminist writers, who denounced the piece as both derogatory and irrelevant. One black woman blogger commented, "My problem is that articles about Michelle Obama's wardrobe, booty, and mom duties are what is fit to publish, what is seen as relevant to a mass audience." (pg. 278)

One such article was a March 2009 New York Times op-ed by Maureen Dowd titled "Should Michelle Cover Up?" The piece was written in response to Michelle's having worn a sleeveless purple dress to President Obama's first address to a joint session of Congress. Dowd's article rehearses some familiar American anxieties about black women's bodies. She expresses a sort of terror that Michelle is a symbol of overt sexuality that should be covered and shrouded so as not to distract men of power. In the piece Dowd claims that it is David Brooks, her fellow editorial writer, who suffers these anxieties, not her, but Dowd does seem irritated about the stimulating effect Michelle's dress had on the congressmen. (pg. 278)

Even as Dowd replays the Jezebel anxiety, she employs the pervasive misrepresentation of the strong black woman. She revels in the idea of Michelle as a powerful superwoman who could easily "wind up and punch out Rush Limbaugh, Bernie Madoff and all the corporate creeps who ripped off America." Dowd is tapping her own racial imagination when she perceives the First Lady as capable of engaging in a street brawl with grown men. This fantasy of the superstrong, masculine black woman who could easily best a man in a physical altercation is a crooked image perpetrated in black popular culture by comedians like Martin Lawrence, Tyler Perry, and the Wayans brothers—all black men who dress as women in comic routines that portray black women as masculine and outrageously pugnacious. (pg. 279)

Yet Michelle Obama's choice of the sleeveless dress (and her later decision to wear shorts in public) can be understood as an attempt to straighten the images in the crooked room. I take her wardrobe choices as evidence that Michelle Obama is actively using her role as First Lady to cultivate a particular representation of femininity that is meant to push back against a number of racialized gender stereotypes. (pg. 280)

Michelle Obama is capturing a particular (though arguably narrow) definition of femininity that is often denied to black women. For example, she chose President Thomas Jefferson's portrait as the backdrop for her official White House photo. There she is, the first black, First Lady, in a sleeveless dress, and behind her is Thomas Jefferson, who raped a teenage bondswoman, Sally Hemings (the half-sister of his wife), and enslaved his own children. ≠ Michelle's photo

executes a self-conscious taunting that reaches across the span of history to repudiate the violence and brutality suffered by so many enslaved women. Michelle stands boldly in a White House where she is mistress, not slave. Her body is for her. She is not reduced to a mule or a breeder. Her children belong to her, and she is free to love and protect them. It is an act of resistance for a black woman to demand that her body belong to herself for her pleasure, her adornment, even her vanity, because in the United States, black women's bodies have often been valued only to the extent that they produce wealth and pleasure for others. When Michelle insists on audacious, sleeveless femininity, she strikes back against the reduction of black women to hypersexual breeders or asexual laborers. Hers is an important departure from the dissemblance strategies of twentieth-century club women who sought to prove their respectability through prim sexual ethics. Michelle refuses to be ashamed of her distinctive black woman's body and all the attributes and anxieties it evokes. Rather than shrouding herself in shame, she shows her body with surprising, selfconfident ease. (pg. 281)

This long tradition of pathologizing black motherhood is the backdrop against which Michelle Obama announced that she planned to serve as mom-in-chief. Many progressive feminists, who had hoped for a more aggressive policy agenda, were distressed with her assertion of motherhood as her primary role. Michelle Obama is a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School who has spent her career as an effective advocate for urban communities in their fraught relationship with powerful institutions. She is smart, capable, and independent. She maintained her own career and ambitions throughout her husband's early forays into politics and even during his election to the US Senate. While no one expected her to commute to a nine-to-five job from the White House, many hoped that she would take on an independent political role in the Obama administration. These people were disappointed when she chose to focus on supporting her daughters through their school transition and providing companionship to her husband as he governs. White feminists in particular saw this as Michelle conforming to restrictive gender norms. (pg. 282)

When a black woman claims public ownership of her children, she helps rewrite this ugly history. In the modern era, black mothers have been publicly shamed as crack mothers, welfare queens, and matriarchs of fatherless families. Black single motherhood is blamed for social ills ranging from crime to drugs to urban disorder. Michelle Obama is an important corrective to this distorted view. She and her own mother, Grandma Robinson, are kind, devoted, loving, and firm parents who challenge the negative images of black motherhood that dominate the public discourse. (pg. 283)

There is a danger in this strategy. Michelle Obama's traditionalist public persona could be used as a weapon against women who do not conform to this domestic ideal. The majority of black mothers are working women who struggle to raise their children without husbands and often without adequate financial support from partners or the state. It would be easy to use Michelle Obama's choice, a choice fostered by a unique circumstance of privilege, to reassert that black women who labor for pay outside the home are inadequate parents. Given the pervasive myths of black women as bad mothers, this narrative could easily be deployed to undercut support for

public policies focused on creation of a just and equal political and economic structure and to focus instead on “marriage” and “family values” as solutions to structural barriers facing black communities. At the same time, these conservative discourses have never needed any particular excuse to exist. Michelle Obama’s framing herself as mom-in-chief does not make her complicit in the demonization of black mothers that began long before she became First Lady. Her decision does, however, deliver a blow to the Mammy image that many might have preferred that she embody. (pg. 285)

In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama recounts the story of the night he delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. After he told Michelle that his stomach felt queasy, she hugged him, looked him in the eye and said, “Just don’t screw it up, buddy!” This gentle teasing of her “rock star” husband was a hallmark of Michelle Obama’s self-presentation early in the presidential primary season. She talked about how Barack did not pick up his dirty socks, laughed about how their daughters complained about his snoring, and was honest about how she sometimes felt abandoned in the early years of child rearing. She explicitly refused to worship her husband solely for political purposes but instead insisted that they were equal partners. “And Barack is very much human. So let’s not deify him, because what we do is we deify, and then we’re ready to chop it down. People have notions of what a wife’s role should be in this process, and it’s been a traditional one of blind adoration. My model is a little different—I think most real marriages are.” For some, Michelle’s honest assessment of Barack made him seem more human and likeable; it allowed many to believe that the Obamas would be models of gender equity in the White House. Others saw Michelle’s unwillingness to take on a traditional spousal role as evidence that she was a dominating, overpowering black woman. (pg. 286)

Remember that the crooked room is not only set askew by the racial inequality of broader society; it is also a problem of sexism within black communities. Black women struggle for recognition both within and outside their own racial group. The belief that black women make inadequately submissive wives is not the exclusive creation of white prejudice. African Americans embraced the image of the strong black woman, and this image figures prominently in the idea of black women as overpowering. For example, during the 2008 campaign, African American comedian Chris Rock added a new joke to his routine. Its premise is that African American women are dominating shrews unable to allow their husbands to lead in the domestic sphere. His humor assumes both that men are the rightful leaders of the home and that black women’s inability to submit to this leadership is pathological. (pg 287)

Barack has a handicap the other candidates don’t have:

Barack Obama has a black wife. And I don’t think a black woman can be first lady of the United States. Yeah, I said it! A black woman can be president, no problem. First lady? Can’t do it. You know why? Because a black woman cannot play the background of a relationship. Just imagine telling your black wife that you’re president? “Honey, I did it! I won! I’m the president” “No, we the president! And I want my girlfriends in the Cabinet. I want Kiki to be secretary of state! She can fight!”

Rock's comic imagination is fueled by widely held assumptions about who black women are in relation to black men: that African American women are strong, unyielding, and uncompromising while black men are endangered and emasculated. The image of aggressive black women dominating their male partners persists despite empirical evidence that African American women are more likely to be victims than aggressors in heterosexual partnerships. Black women suffer higher rates of domestic assault and homicide than women of other racial and ethnic groups. Their romantic attachments are also linked to their growing incarceration rates: black women's crimes tend to be ancillary to those of their male partners. Black women are also the women most likely to face unassisted child rearing and the vulnerability to poverty that single parenthood entails. The reality is that black women's political, social, and economic marginalization ensures that they nearly always "play the background," but Rock can get an easy laugh by evoking the familiar stereotype of the domineering black woman. (Pg. 288)

She found it necessary to defuse the dangerous image of the angry black matriarch by consciously embracing a softer image. After her pride comment and the Princeton thesis were used to frame her effectively as an "angry black woman," she noticeably softened her spousal image. While the couple's mutual respect remained evident, Michelle was more frequently photographed with her head on Barack's shoulder, grasping his hand at public events, or evading reporters by stealing brief, romantic walks on the White House grounds. The outspoken Michelle Obama who made many bristle with anxiety earlier in the campaign was replaced largely by a woman who evokes a warm feeling when we see her with her husband, her children, and even her dog. Many reporters and scholars expressed anxiety about the ascendance of this kinder, gentler Michelle. They worried that she was being packaged in a way that thwarts her authenticity and undermines the efforts of feminists committed to the notion of women as equal partners in their marriages. Although this worry is not groundless, it is important to remember that as an African American woman, Michelle Obama is constrained by different stereotypes from those that inhibit white women. After she was depicted as irrationally angry and potentially unpatriotic, the public space for her as an independent but loving wife shrank considerably. (pg. 289)

Appendix

This curriculum meets the standards on district, state and national levels. By using a variety of written and visual texts, it provides a theory (the "Crooked Room") to think critically about popular figures like Michelle Obama and movies like "The Hate U Give" and "Hidden Figures". Similarly, this curriculum meets the standards through the writing assignments where it asks students to respond critically and creatively about the texts.

