



## Playing it Safe in the Classroom

How Avoiding Controversy Norms the White Conservative Experience

**Author** \_ **Ronnie K. Stephens** ([ronniekstephens@gmail.com](mailto:ronniekstephens@gmail.com)), Instructor at Tarrant County College, Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington.

**C**ontroversial as it may be, I entered education through Teach for America (TFA), an organization that purports to place new teachers in regions that struggle with literacy, retention, and poverty. There are many very harsh and warranted criticisms of the program, particularly related to their perpetuation of a white-savior mentality and the appeal to ambitious graduates looking to boost their resumes with a bit of social justice work before moving on to prestigious careers in public policy, politics, and law. I begin here not because I want to shape perspectives on TFA, but to contextualize how TFA has shaped me and, more specifically, my approach to curricula. I applied to the program several years after leaving university, motivated both by my passion for education and by my desire to help dismantle systemic oppression in America. I wanted to work for and with students who were disenfranchised, silenced, and otherwise ignored, but let's be clear: I did not want to save my students; I wanted to celebrate them.

One obvious way to do that, I assumed, would be to diversify the curriculum so they could experience stories that mirrored their own lives, read about characters who looked like them and sounded like them, and engage in discussions about conflicts relevant to their respective communities. Because I was initially placed in a school on the cusp of state intervention, my earliest administrators were indifferent to my choice of reading selections. In fact, the first two principals I worked for explicitly told me not to ask them for permission before

teaching things I felt the students would respond to; rather, they would come to me only if the materials became an issue. They had already learned that few parents in our community would even pay attention to what their children were reading, and fewer still would bother to object. In those first few years, I operated with complete freedom, never worrying that my reading selections would disrupt perspectives or challenge ideologies. To me, that was and is the point of literature. Even now, I begin every semester by telling my students they will be



uncomfortable with some of our readings, and that I view discomfort as requisite to learning.

As circumstances dictated, I left my first post after four years and moved to Texas, where I began teaching for a very successful, if incredibly affluent and conservative, school district outside Fort Worth. I was immediately confronted with an entirely new, but pervasive, mentality: *Don't teach anything that might upset the parents*. This practice has followed me from position to position, including my most recent assignment as a dual-credit professor for a local community college. I have come to learn that this is code for: *Teach to conservative White America*. This semester, I have engaged in conversations with colleagues in higher education, as well as fellow book reviewers, about several new books and their applicability in the classroom. Despite starred reviews and award nominations, I continue to encounter resistance to titles like *How We Fight for Our Lives*, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and *Who Put This Song On?* on the basis that they will disrupt or displease our conservative community.

This practice of centering conservative perspectives is alarming and problematic, as it ultimately normalizes a singular American experience and alienates voices that are already marginalized in every aspect of our society. More importantly, these decisions fail our community, rendering educators tacitly complicit in the marginalization of underrepresented voices. This is most clear in the decisions made surrounding the suitability of books involving sexual encounters. As author Saeed Jones observes, "In my career, I've learned that any depiction of queer desire will be regarded by many straight/closeted people as more lurid or provocative than it actually is. Take that same scene, change the pronouns to make it a straight couple and it will barely even earn comment" (Jones 2020). This resonates heavily for me this semester, as it perfectly summarizes a conversation I had with my department chair when discussing a new novel I hoped to include in my Composition II courses.

I approached my department chair shortly after Ocean Vuong was awarded a MacArthur Genius Grant last year with the idea of swapping *Beartown*, by Fredrik Backman, for Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. In the interest of full disclosure, I informed him that my primary concern, and the reason for my approaching him, was that Vuong's novel included a scene in which the main character has sex with his love interest. The scene is fairly graphic, but the sex depicted is remarkably tender and, perhaps more notably, consensual. As expected, my department chair had instant reservations, and he advised that I not teach it in my dual-credit classes for fear of backlash. One of the things he said ultimately prompted discussions with my colleagues and prompted this paper: *I don't like that I'm advising you against*

*teaching this book, and I don't think it's right, but I do think it's risky to teach it in a dual-credit classroom given our student population*. I appreciate many things about my current teaching position, and his candor in that moment made the decision a bit easier to respect.

It bears noting that I had intentionally waited until Vuong's novel gained significant acclaim, hoping that the success of the book would bolster my case for its inclusion. The novel was longlisted for the 2019 National Book Award for Fiction, the Carnegie Medal in Fiction, the 2019 Aspen Words Literacy Prize, and the PEN/Hemingway Debut Novel Award; it was Shortlisted for the 2019 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize and won the New England Book Award for Fiction. And, of course, the author was awarded one of the most prestigious prizes in literature following the novel's publication. The fact that I believed such a résumé was necessary before even *asking* to include the book in my classes is indicative of a culture that routinely suppresses marginalized experiences in literature selections. I had no such worry when I asked to teach *Beartown*, which is a wonderful novel, but one that involves frequent uses of profanity, a graphic rape scene, and disturbing homophobic proclamations. I've taught long enough to know administrators and parents can overlook certain "controversial" elements, and object immediately to others.

Any educator who has spent time as a secondary English teacher will be familiar with *Lord of the Flies*, a book that is not just frequently taught but often required by school districts. I was asked to teach it in both Oklahoma schools and Texas schools. When I objected, after three consecutive years of discomfort requiring students to read the novel, I was alienated by my fellow English colleagues. My department chair supported me, but others in the department believed I was being too sensitive and pushing a liberal agenda by objecting to the book. My reservations were, among other things, about the infamous slaughter of the sow:

The afternoon wore on, haze and dreadful with damp heat; the sow staggered her way ahead of them, bleeding and mad, and the hunters followed, wedded to her in lust, excited by the long chase and the dropped blood.

...

Roger found a lodgement for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inch, and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream.

...

Roger began to withdraw his spear and noticed it for the first time. Robert stabilized the thing in a phrase that was received uproariously.

"Right up her ass!" (Golding 134–36)



Here readers encounter a group of boys in the early stages of adolescence indulging in forcibly sodomizing a live animal. They are bloodthirsty and violent. The author tells us explicitly that they enjoy the pain they are inflicting. Some will inherently argue that this is a very brief and important scene in an otherwise classic novel. We have been teaching *Lord of the Flies* for years, and neither parents nor educators object to any significant degree.

Ironically, this scene is precisely the reason I believed that my department chair would approve *Beartown*, despite a homophobic tirade by one teenage boy and a violent rape by another. “Collect the pucks! Defend the fortress! Don’t get fucked up the ass! No ass fucking on my ice,” a boy shouts in a rant that spans two full pages. He is angry with his hockey coach, angry with the expectations of masculinity imposed on him by the town and by his parents. Note how similar the language is to that of the boys killing their prey in *Lord of the Flies*. Critically speaking, both scenes are relevant to their respective narratives, and both serve to develop key themes. Neither is included simply to shock the reader. Where one implies that sodomizing another living thing is a display of power and control, the other reinforces that being sodomized is a display of weakness and degradation. Both are highly problematic in their characterization of a sexual act most commonly, if wrongly, associated with gay men, but neither is inflammatory or controversial enough to warrant removing the books from the classroom.

In contrast, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* was ruled out by my department chair for including a scene depicting the exact same sexual act described in the above examples. While Golding and Backman include these scenes to comment on masculinity and power dynamics, Vuong includes a pivotal moment in which the protagonist accepts his sexuality and chooses to act on a desire he has been wrestling with for much of the novel. The decision is not made lightly, and the two boys approach the moment with all the seriousness and affection we might expect from any two characters who decide to lose their virginity to one another. After considering it for months, practicing various positions and grappling with the implications of being a top or a bottom, of whether or not their desire meant they were “faggots,” Trevor whispers to the protagonist:

“I’ll go slow, okay?” His mouth a gash of youth. “I’ll be easy.”

I turned—tentative, thrilled—toward the dirt floor, planted my forehead on my arm, and waited.

...

When he pushed I felt myself scream—but didn’t. Instead, my mouth was full of salted skin, then the bone underneath as

I bit down on my arm. Trevor stopped, not yet all the way in, sat up, and asked if I was okay. (Vuong 2019, 201)

The scene progresses softly and honestly, with both boys feeling vulnerable, scared, exposed. Each reassures the other, and Trevor continues to check in with the protagonist to make sure that it is okay for them to continue. It is a perfect illustration of consent culture, a scene which says as much about masculinity as either Golding or Backman, and yet a scene that automatically disqualifies the novel from being taught in a high school classroom, dual-credit or otherwise.

Given the conversation with my department chair about *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, I knew better than to ask about another remarkable book published last year, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, by Saeed Jones. The memoir is unflinching in its investigation of identity, taking the reader through an often traumatic and self-destructive coming-of-age story that considers the ramifications of being black and gay. As Jones walks the halls of his high school four years after the murders of James Byrd Jr. and Matthew Shepard, he has an important realization that sets the tone for the rest of the book:

By the time Matthew Shepard’s life and death made it to the classrooms of my high school in 2002, my feelings about him and James Byrd Jr. had started to swirl and converge. I was walking through a dusty, florescent-lit hallway—halfway to the assembly hall, trying with every filament of my body to look cool—when the two truths finally collided:

Being *black* can get you killed. Being *gay* can get you killed.

*Being a black gay boy is a death wish.*

And one day, if you’re lucky, your life and death will become some artist’s new “project.” (Jones 2019, 44)

Jones, as a teenager in 2002, is aware that any eventual tragedy he befalls will be tokenized and fetishized, but never truly honored or addressed, something that is equally true when he published *How We Fight for Our Lives* in 2019. This remains a vital and frequent conversation among marginalized communities, and the importance of that conversation in contemporary American society is evidenced by the fact that Jones’ memoir was awarded both the 2019 Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction and the 2020 Stonewall Book Award-Isreal Fishman Nonfiction Award.

Throughout the memoir, Jones is forced to come to terms with the fact that both society as a whole and, more specifically, his loved ones do not accept him as he is. The narrative is painful and difficult, but it also moves toward hope with astonishing grace. In one particularly difficult scene, Jones confronts how he is fetishized by closeted gay men because of



his blackness. He and another man have just begun to have sex when the man, who is white, shouts, “Come on! . . . Fuck me with that big black dick!” (Jones 2019, 105). It is Jones’ reflection, both in the moment and afterward, that makes this such a pivotal moment in the book:

That sentence had been in his head since he first saw my profile online. The words flickered when he first opened his door to me, flickered again when I spread my legs on his couch, again when my ripped shirt fell to his bedroom floor. In that blue-lit bedroom, my black dick was all I was.

...

As I write, I want to pull myself out of him and out of that room. . . . However many masks we invent and deploy, in the end, we cannot control what other people see when they look at us. (107)

In the pages that follow, Jones comments on the frequency with which he is reduced, objectified, and dehumanized on the basis of his blackness, his queerness, or both. For teenagers coming to terms with their own intersectional identities, the importance of representation and visibility like that in Jones’ memoir is indispensable. Yet I knew not to ask because Jones is a black gay man, and the simple act of including his memoir in my syllabus is viewed not just as a political statement, but also a controversial and inflammatory choice.

Despite increasing attention to intersectionality and identity politics, despite the ever-visible conversations around the dangers of heteronormativity, despite the widespread knowledge that suicide is the leading cause of death for adolescents as young as ten years old, I have internalized that Jones’ memoir cannot be included on my syllabus because it addresses race and sexuality explicitly. And if we are to pretend that race is not a factor, consider Morgan Parker’s debut novel, *Who Put This Song On?*, released in 2019. Like Jones’ memoir, it includes an explicit scene in which the protagonist, a young woman, is nearly raped by a White boy from her school. Like Jones, the protagonist in Parker’s novel is forced to confront what it means to be fetishized for being black. Though the initial encounter is consensual, the mood changes when the boy remarks, “I’ve seriously always wanted to do a black chick” (Parker 2019, 196). The narrator is initially stunned into silence before laughing nervously. As the scene continues, Morgan begins to resist as the boy becomes increasingly hostile.

“Let me see that black pussy.”

I wriggle underneath him and start to sit up. “Wait, what?”

Running my fingers through my hair, the ecstasy lifts. “No. No, this isn’t what I want.” I pull my sweatshirt down and wipe the slobber from my face.

“Aw, come on,” he whines, sliding his hands between my legs, and he isn’t gentle at all. “You little slut,” he cackles menacingly. “God, I wanna fuck you so hard.” It’s like he’s reciting phrases from a script.

Morgan is able to open the door to the truck and escape the situation, but she is filled with fear as the boy revs his engine and speeds by, yelling “Black bitch” as he passes. Though she decides not to report the incident or tell her friends, the agency in this scene is clear.

This exchange is embedded in a larger narrative about blackness as the protagonist, Morgan, navigates a predominantly white community and school that views her as “not really black.” Both White and Black characters, ranging from close friends to a potential love interest to her teacher, question her blackness for a variety of reasons. It is this scene, though, that highlights for Morgan that her skin color is innately tied to others’ perspectives of her. Morgan responds to the situation with incredible strength and resolve, asserting her ownership over her body and refusing to be fetishized in such a way, yet I knew immediately this scene would be too “controversial” for my dual-credit students. While some may argue the scenes in Jones’ memoir and Parker’s novel are not problematic on the basis of race, consider this encounter from *Beartown*, the novel I was approved to teach:

She feels the weight of his body on top of hers and she laughs. . . . But when he forces her jeans down she stops him. He seems to think it’s a game, so she catches his hand and holds it tight.

“I don’t want to, not tonight. I’ve nev . . .” she whispers. “Of course you want to,” he insists.

She flares up.

“Are you deaf or what? I said no!”

His grip on her wrists tightens, first almost imperceptibly, then to the point where it hurts.

...

He doesn’t let go. His eyes just turn black. . . . When she tries to stop his hand he closes his other fist tightly around her throat like a vise, and when she tries to scream his fingers are covering her lips. Lack of oxygen makes her slip in and out of consciousness, and in the midst of everything she will remember peculiar details that no one asks about: a button coming off her blouse when he tears it open . . . (Backman 2017, 176)



This scene ends only when another boy enters the room, distracting the rapist long enough for the girl to break free. For the duration of the novel, the girl, who is fifteen, faces violent backlash for reporting the assault. She is physically abused, alienated by her peers, and even considers suicide in the days following the attack. That this scene does not eliminate *Beartown*, and in fact is pointed to as an example of the importance of the book, clearly illustrates how codified the word “controversial” is in our education system. While *Who Put This Song On?* features a Black female protagonist with agency, one who attends therapy and works to manage her mental illness, the inclusion of a violent sexual encounter between a White boy and a Black girl is enough to eliminate the novel from most classrooms. In contrast, *Beartown*, a wonderful novel in its own right, is acceptable despite homophobic and racist language, a violent rape scene, and significantly more profane language. The key distinction here is that *Beartown* maintains the fragile White woman trope, and its relationships do not cross racial or economic boundaries. Put another way, *Beartown* centers Whiteness and traditional femininity, while *Who Put This Song On?* centers Blackness and female agency.

Every one of these novels includes numerous teaching moments, and all are recognized by critics as well-written, important stories. Yet those by White men, centering White characters and reinforcing heteronormativity, are considered “safe” options in the classroom while those by people of color are dismissed unanimously because they address race and homosexuality.

Whether intentional or not, the decision to “play it safe” in the classroom has resounding effects on our students, on our communities, and on America as a whole. As educators,

we are reinforcing the belief that conversations about race and sexuality are inflammatory. Those of us who do choose to address these issues—as well as we can under the watchful eyes of conservative parents—are continually at risk of reprimand and even termination.

Every semester, my evaluations are filled with comments from students who believe it inappropriate that our readings openly discuss race, sexuality, gender, and rape culture. Just last semester, one student lamented that my choice of readings had caused many uncomfortable conversations with their mother because their beliefs directly contradicted what they were reading, and another remarked that I should not facilitate conversations about communities to which I do not belong or about issues that do not affect me directly. These comments highlight the expectation among students that we will protect their comfort at all costs. What concerns me is not just that supposedly conservative communities are comfortable with triggering depictions of homophobia and rape, but that the mere inclusion of narratives that center experiences outside the White conservative experience are instantly viewed not as legitimate and authentic representations of America, but as intentional, politically charged decisions. The dangers of perpetuating this mentality are clear and well-documented. It is time we, who have taken up the charge of improving our students’ minds and inspiring critical inquiry, acknowledge that playing it safe in the classroom has nothing to do with the safety of our students and everything to do with the security of our jobs. We are, like it or not, weighing the mental and emotional health of our students against our own self-interest every time we make a curriculum choice motivated solely, and explicitly, to appease White conservative parents.

## References

- Backman, Fredrik. 2017. *Beartown*. Translated by Neil Smith. New York: Atria.
- Golding, William. 1954. *Lord of the Flies*. New York: Penguin.
- Jones, Saeed. 2019. *How We Fight for Our Lives*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Jones, Saeed (@theferocity). 2020. “In my career, I’ve learned that any depiction of queer desire will be regarded by many straight/closeted people as more lurid or provocative than it

actually is. Take that same scene, change the pronouns to make it a straight couple and it will barely even earn comment.”

Twitter, January 9, 2020, 10:35 a.m. <https://twitter.com/theferocity/status/1215311035906895873>.

- Parker, Morgan. 2019. *Who Put This Song On?* New York: Delacorte.
- Vuong, Ocean. 2019. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. New York: Penguin.