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**CONFRONT AND REMAKE: LITERARY READING AND
INSTITUTIONAL RACIAL JUSTICE, OR LEARNING TO
READING WITH ALICE WALKER, EDWIDGE DANTICAT,
AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE**

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Confront and Remake: Literary Reading and Institutional Racial Justice,
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Alice Walker, Edwidge Danticat, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, three of the leading American writers at work today, write with delight and awe about their own miraculous lives as readers. In words that echo through the academic, the popular, and the digital, they tell and retell their own reading stories, trekking through racial histories of enslavement, migration, and colonization to marvel at their lives as powerful black women readers and writers who were never meant to be. In the words of Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, she and her literary black sisters have been cast as “accidents of literacy” who create against a particularly American history of “people who might not have been able to go to school at all, who might never have learned to read and write” (19). Even now after a decades-long career of both critical and popular acclaim, including for example both a National Book Award and an Oprah’s Book Club selection, Danticat confesses the “thrill” of taking up black women’s “readers’ stories,” her own included, that testify to the stories that have shaped and are shaped by those who live, read, and write against the ongoing reign of racism and injustice in the United States (11).

In this paper I explore the ways these three impossibly prolific readers can teach liberal arts students and institutions to practice literary reading for racial justice. The paper looks closely at the reading lives modeled by black women writers like Walker, Danticat, and Adichie to argue that literary reading is a critical practice to confront the American legacy of white privilege and remake historically and predominantly white liberal arts institutions around a creative vision of racial justice. Building on a growing body of research on literary activism broadly and theories

of “anti-racist reading” specifically, I close read literacy narratives by Walker, Danticat, and Adichie as both pedagogical and institutional texts. I draw on and extend my experience teaching these narratives in core, first-year composition, general education, and advanced literature courses to propose institutional modes of reading for racial justice, specifically the work of reckoning with a long history of institutional whiteness and building a future of institutional reconciliation.

Part I: Black Texts, White Readers, and Anti-Racist Reading Practices

This paper proposes the intentional and transparent designation of narratives by black American women writers as institutional texts at predominantly white liberal arts institutions. As such, this project steps into potent and sometimes vitriolic debates over the work of the liberal arts, higher education, social justice, literary interpretation, and most importantly for this argument, whiteness and the reading of black texts. I highlight some of these arenas, though certainly not all, below.

American higher education today is often depicted in a state of crisis due to debilitating amounts of student debt, increased political partisanship, and debate over the very purpose of higher education. NYU professor of Ethical Leadership Jonathan Haidt, for example, has very publicly pitted what he sees as the historical truth-seeking telos of higher education against a rising social justice telos (to which we might also add a career telos prioritized understandably by many financially-concerned students and parents). Haidt and others critique the prominence – though not necessarily the presence – of social justice initiatives within academic work.

Against this skepticism, however, stands a body of work from social scientists and literary scholars that makes the case for what might be called literary activism, a term I use to name the work of literary reading toward structural justice including transformations of the

individual that contribute to justice-minded transformations of society. In 2013, Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Mihnea C. Moldoveanu followed by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, researchers from the University of Toronto and the New School respectively, published two groundbreaking studies that correlated literary reading with increased capacities for open-mindedness and theory of mind, empathetic qualities that allow one to acknowledge, understand, and take interest in the ways others' beliefs and desires differ from one's own. The following year Dan R. Johnson, Brandie L. Huffman, and Danny M. Jasper, researchers from Washington and Lee University, looked more specifically at the relationship between literary reading and racial empathy, finding that targeted reading of counterstereotypical literature, that is literature that shows characters thinking, acting, or speaking in ways counter to problematic racial stereotypes, decreases readers' categorical race biases. For many literary scholars, this research parallels their own research and teaching experiences with diverse literatures and for some a core work of much literary expression. As just one example, Elizabeth Ammons, professor of English and American studies, turns her readers, both academic and popular, to what she calls the long "progressive activist tradition of U.S. literature" (ix). Ammons points to diverse writers like Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Pauline Hopkins, Zitkala-Sa, Wendell Berry, Gloria Naylor, and Leslie Marmon Silko to make both a particular textual claim that "words do have the power to transform people" (ix) and a broad social claim: "Inside and outside academic settings we need to revive the liberal arts as a progressive cultural force that not only provides critique but also offers workable ideas and inspiration in the real-world struggle to achieve social justice and restoration of the earth" (xiv). Collectively, this body of works finds and flexes the activism potential of literary reading, pointing to the transformational power of literary words both for individuals and societies, but it also depicts reading as a singular and stable act,

positioning exposure to certain reading material – literary, nonstereotypical, activist – as a straightforward catalyst toward social justice.

There is a long history of suspicion toward the simple good of literary exposure, particularly when it comes to putting literature by people of color in the hands of white readers, or in the case of my argument historically white institutions. Since Norman Mailer’s landmark 1957 essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” major scholars including bell hooks, Eric Lott, Susan Gubar, and Greg Tate have taken an understandably skeptical stance on racial empathy, warning against the devastating appropriation, impersonation, fetishization, and erasure of black lives by white readers who consume black texts. While acknowledging the real danger of such “colonizing” by some, many, or even most white readers (3), Kimberly Chabot Davis more recently reconsiders the possibility and vitality of empathetic reading for white readers of black texts. In *Beyond the White Negro* Davis argues for a particular empathetic posture for white readers that she calls “anti-racist reading.” At its most palatable, Davis dresses this “anti-racist reading” with appealing language; it is a “desire for social justice and equality” cultivated by thoughtful reading of others’ stories (9). But at its most radical, most exposed, and most direct, “anti-racist reading” is for the white reader “a self-implicating” act, a “self-reckoning” with one’s own “complicity” in ongoing systems of racism, and ultimately, a “radical act[] of treason against white privilege” (5, 9, 3). “Black-authored representations,” according to Davis, “can enable white audiences to look at their own whiteness from the outside in, to read themselves through black viewpoints, and to gain a self-implicating understanding of systemic racism and white-skin privilege” (4). Davis’s research shows that the potential for anti-racist reading depends significantly on the content of the text, which must urge readers toward the truth of structural racism. Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist*, recently published “An

Antiracist Reading List” rich with literary texts like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Langston Hughes’ *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Davis argues further that the reading context even of the most anti-racist material shapes the possibility of “anti-racist reading.” Specifically, Davis finds that interracial co-readers and extended discussion supported by the language and ideas of some accessible but critical theory, such as Beverly Daniel Tatum’s “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism,” are important for white readers to do the personally and socially transformative work of “anti-racist reading.” In her effort to interrogate the actual experiences of white readers of black texts, Davis perhaps surprisingly, given her credentials as a literary scholar, shies away from the textual practice of these anti-racist readings. This is where I turn to Walker, Danticat, and Adichie as models, teachers, and bold practitioners of their own “anti-racist reading.”

I teach these narratives almost every semester across a set of core, first-year composition, general education, and advanced literature courses that include contemporary immigrant narratives, early literatures of enslavement and abolition, and intersectional women’s writing. Every semester I am struck anew by the powerful experience of students who are learning the human and academic work of reading alongside these women who are simultaneously elite writers, fellow readers, and profoundly demanding. I am grateful for the way Walker, Danticat, and Adichie speak directly to women of color in my classes who are often intimately allied to these reading stories in ways that are distinct from my own reading, rereading, and teaching of them as a white female professor of American literature at a predominantly white institution. Given this positionality, I am also uniquely grateful for the way Walker, Danticat, and Adichie teach literary reading as an anti-racist practice. In my own teaching of these texts, I name my

whiteness and often narrate the evolution of my anti-racist reading, modeling the ways Walker, Danticat, and Adichie have shaped my ability and my willingness to confront my own participation – as reader, teacher, and scholar – in systems of white privilege. Similarly, I have watched individual student-readers of Walker, Danticat, and Adichie face, by way of these texts, the systems of whiteness in and around themselves. Out of these experiences, I am now beginning to think about these not only as pedagogical texts but also as institutional texts that might similarly teach us how to confront our own systemic and institutional whiteness.

Part II: Reading with Alice Walker, or Reckoning with Institutional Whiteness

Alice Walker is one of the most prolific black American women writing today. Over the course of her fifty year career, she has given us stacks of notable books for children, books of poetry, essay collections, and novels, including the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*. Since its 1982 release *The Color Purple* has been made and remade in film and on the stage, arguably becoming one of the most important – and most consumed – black texts in the collective American imagination. The year after she birthed the women of *The Color Purple* – Celie, Nettie, Shug, and Sofia – Walker published *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, a collection of 36 intimate and brilliant essays detailing her creative life as a reader of black women's words.

Throughout the collection, Walker reads with a self-conscious and direct intertextuality. As a meticulous re-reader and close reader, Walker thinks about, with, and through the words of others, especially her literary mothers like Phillis Wheatley and Zora Neale Hurston, recasting their work to do her own. In the case of the title essay “In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,” Walker claims an ancient family of women, especially black women, who in ways bold and quiet, high and low, “kept alive” the spirit of creation that has always filled her work as a black

woman writer (237). Here, I begin to explore the way Walker's womanist practice of intertextual reading can help institutions toward the work of racial justice specifically by reckoning with the erasures, denials, and violences of their own long legacies of whiteness.¹

Walker's essay is rich with and for this reckoning work. One notable example involves her reading of the once wildly popular and enslaved black poet Phillis Wheatley. In an act of reclamation, Walker casts Wheatley, the first black woman to publish in colonial America, as a most foundational – though “most pathetic, most misunderstood” – artist (235). Over the course of several pages, Walker tackles some of Wheatley's most devastating moments of inherited and internalized racism, such as her notorious description of a “golden hair[ed]” liberty, asking alongside so many other angry black readers of Wheatley, “How could she?” (236, 237) However, in a series of paragraphs often beginning with the contrasting conjunctions “But” and “Yet,” Walker turns and returns to Wheatley's troubling words, trying on postures of critique and generosity, disappointment and understanding. Walker reads indiscriminately, neither censoring her judgment nor her sympathy, honoring the clash of simultaneous feelings that these words from her literary foremother conjure.

Notably, Walker does not journey through Wheatley's words alone. Rather, she invites us into intertextual re-reading practices that are thick with the words and ideas of others, most notably the remarkable British intellectual, feminist, and writer Virginia Woolf. In an act of bold intertextual reading, Walker brings together Wheatley and Woolf, women divided by race, class, condition, continent, and time. She writes at length:

¹ In the beginning of *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker offers a series of intersecting definitions for her term “womanist,” including a “black feminist or feminist of color”; the “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” of black women; a “woman who loves other women”; and one who “Loves music. Loves dance. Love the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (xi-xii).

Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One's Own*, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself.

What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail black girl who required a servant of her own at times – her health was so precarious – and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.

Virginia Woolf wrote further, speaking of course not of our Phillis, that “any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert “eighteenth century,” insert “black woman,” insert “born or made a slave”] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert “Saint”], feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add “chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one’s body by someone else, submission to an alien religion”], that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.”

The key words, as they related to Phillis, are “contrary instincts.” For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley – as when we read the novels of Nella Larsen or the oddly false-sounding autobiography of that freest of all black women writers, Zora Hurston – evidence of “contrary instincts” is everywhere. Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind. (235-236)

In what follows, Walker imbibes Woolf’s notion of “contrary instincts,” as she treks toward a culminating reading of Wheatley’s “contrary” words, a reading Walker directs intimately to the poet herself: “But at last, Phillis, we understand . . . We know now that you are not an idiot or a traitor . . . [but] a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, though in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue” (237). Wheatley’s words are the explicit target of Walker’s reading, and she makes clear the role Woolf’s words have played in helping her read Wheatley again and read her well. And yet, in perhaps the boldest moment of redemption for Wheatley, Walker also makes clear, through the simple technique of adapted quoting, Wheatley’s role in helping her and us read Woolf again and read her well.

In the quote above Walker’s bracketed words quietly interrupt Woolf’s, correcting but not condemning one of the most influential writers in modern literature. Taking equal footing

with Woolf, Walker's unhesitating interruptions resurrect the life, body, and voice of Phillis Wheatley and, alongside her, the many nameless black creators forgotten by the world. They replace the ridiculed bad poet of two centuries ago with the bold "black woman" who though "made into a slave" forged rhyming couplets however imperfectly against the "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of [her] body by someone else." And with this restored Wheatley in place, standing right in the middle of these most famous lines, we see Woolf's words anew for all their truths and their untruths. Without undermining what Woolf has given, including what she has given to the black women writers before and after her, Walker exposes Woolf's complicity with the economic, political, and literary systems of white privilege that surround her life, career, and words. It is this almost impossible act of generosity and critique that is so important for white readers of Walker's essay, for in this subtle moment, so rich with the craft of reading and writing, Walker is clear: to know Wheatley and the sacred humanity of her words, white readers must reckon with the unwritten powers and privileges of their own white lives. Walker removes the scales of whiteness from readers' eyes, compelling white readers to see themselves and reckon with, in Davis's words, the racist structures that gird "their own social position and alliances" (11).

In the classroom, Walker's essay is a remarkable site for students to face the truth of white privilege head on. A master of subtlety, Walker does not name whiteness or make it a clear target in her essay. Rather, her essay functions as a sacred space for black women; it is a world built by and for black women as creators, artists, writers, singers, quilters, gardeners, and mothers. Yet, in this act of bold womanism, Walker carves out room, in the brackets, for white readers to do the important work of Davis's "self-reckoning." I ask student-readers seemingly simple questions of formalist textual analysis – Why do these brackets exist? What work does

Walker do in the brackets? Why is this work done in the brackets? – but thanks to Walker, these questions about structure, quotation, and punctuation open up questions about Woolf’s white privilege and by extension the privileges of whiteness in or around their own lives. Walker’s subtlety means there is a real danger that white student-readers and white teacher-readers alike pass right over her brackets, missing the critical opportunity to face their whiteness head on. However, there is a real potential for white readers to begin this critical work surrounded by the simultaneously devoted and audacious lives of women like Walker, Wheatley, and Woolf.

I teach Walker’s essay most often in Created and Called for Community, the core class taken by all first-year and transfer students at my institution. As a “core” text, the only by a woman of color in this curriculum, Walker’s essay is already functioning as a kind of institutional text, but we have yet to leverage it as a critical text for our own institutional reckoning. I wonder, what would we learn if we read, as Walker does, into the gaps and silences of our institution? What stories, lives, and voices would stand in our brackets if we dared to see them?

Part III: Reading with Danticat and Adichie, or the Dangerous Work of Institutional Reconciliation

It is significant that the womanist life of *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* continues to shape black women writing into and transforming Walker’s legacy of anti-racist reading. Like Walker, Edwidge Danticat and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have been captivated by their own reading stories, and in writing and rewriting their reading lives as black American women in the 21st century, they continue to grow Walker’s sacred space of and for black women. To do this, they have recalled and recast Walker’s words in the making of their own.

In “Create Dangerously,” a composite of personal narrative and aesthetic treatise, Haitian-American novelist, memoirist, and critic Edwidge Danticat calls forth Walker to understand the legacies from which she writes. This 2008 keynote address for the annual Toni Morrison Lecture at Princeton University turned title essay for the 2010 collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, examines reading and writing as acts of survival tended sometimes quietly and sometimes radically by a long history of immigrating global artists. Catalyzed by a move from Haiti to the United States during her coming of age as a reader, Danticat moves through chronological and national borders to claim a literary family from Sophocles to Toni Morrison, Albert Camus to Gabriel García Márquez, Alice Walker to Danny Laferrière. This robust literary tribe stands in contrast to the “deficit” of “fanatical readers” in her family of birth (11), but just as Walker reread and resurrected Phillis Wheatley from a grave of ridicule, Danticat by way of Walker rereads and resurrects the impossible reading lives of the family to which she was born:

Perhaps there are no [readers or] writers in my family because they were too busy trying to find bread. Perhaps there are no [readers or] writers in my family because they were not allowed to or could barely afford to attend a decrepit village school as children. Perhaps there are no artists in my family because they were silenced by the brutal directives of one dictatorship, or one natural disaster, after another. Perhaps, just as Alice Walker writes of her own forebears in her essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” my blood ancestors – unlike my literary ancestors – were so weather-beaten, terror-stricken, and maimed that they were stifled. (13-14)

Calling on Walker, Danticat is able to imagine and thus understand the unwritten creative lives of a family that has felt both so familiar and so strange.

Similarly, Danticat’s contemporary, Nigerian-American novelist and essayist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, turns to Walker to understand her own reading life. Adichie became an international literary celebrity with her 2009 TEDGlobal presentation “The Danger of a Single Story.” One of the most popular TEDtalks of all time, Adichie’s words have been most

recently collected in *Black Ink*, Stephanie Stokes Oliver's tribute to the radical lives of black readers and writers in the United States. Calling on her own reading life as a Nigerian become Nigerian-American, Adichie decries the pervasive singularity of the stories we know and tell. Adichie's personal reading story twists through a childhood love for British and American fiction, rebirth with Nigerian and Guinean novelists Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, rereadings of "classic" texts from Locke, Kipling, Tyler, Updike, Steinbeck, and Gaitskill, and finally a Walkerian literary "paradise" ripe with new layers of dynamic and varied stories (223). In a powerful act of call and response, Adichie recasts Walker's own recasting of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. She speaks aloud Walker's own description of a people – her black, southern, migrated family – reading and recovering their full, complicated, and forgotten selves: "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained" (223). Adichie responds, "I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (223).

Danticat and Adichie, Walker's self-proclaimed literary daughters, meet in this promise of paradise. As black women with chosen rather than born American identities, they dig through vast personal and structural histories shaped by racial injustice in order to step toward a paradise of racial reconciliation made, as Adichie asserts, by reading well. Together, Danticat and Adichie insist that careful and critical reading practices make reconciliation uniquely possible, but the refrain of "danger" that echoes throughout their stories frames this reconciliation work in strikingly unromantic terms.

Up to the final moments of her talk, Adichie emphasizes not the possibility of paradise but the dangerous likelihood of ongoing injustice. She circles around a reemerging danger of those single stories that flatten our robust and shared humanity:

The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story . . . The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar . . . Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (221-222)

Even as Adichie ultimately names the ways stories “repair,” “empower,” and “humanize,” and “repair,” the grammatical structure of her sentences holds on to the ways stories continue to “break,” “dispossess,” and “malign.” This refrain shows the ongoing work of true reckoning. Walker’s reckoning with whiteness, neatly modeled within the precise boundaries of her brackets, for Adichie becomes a lifetime of messier re-reckonings with a most dangerous and most resilient single story, that of American whiteness. Scholars like Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, and public artists and intellectuals like Ava DuVernay who directed *Selma, 13th*, and *When They See Us* have documented the long evolution of whiteness in the laws, policies, and practices of the United States. Adichie speaks directly into this history, and partners her bold reach toward paradise with vigilant practices of re-reckoning. This is an important vision for white readers and institutions who are notoriously eager for the promise of justice and reconciliation. Taken as an institutional text, Adichie’s narrative can teach us to see the long work of institutional reconciliation together with the long work of re-reckoning. The work of diversity, inclusive excellence, and racial reconciliation is often importantly represented in long-term institutional objectives and strategic planning, and this holds the institution accountable to support this work with financial, programmatic, and personnel resources. And yet,

as a careful reading of Adichie's text helps us see, the work of reconciliation demands ongoing and messy encounters with institutional complicity in systems of racial injustice.

For Danticat, like Adichie, reading is an inherently dangerous act. Adapting Camus' famous phrase, she implores artists to "create dangerously, for people who read dangerously . . . Writ[e] knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them" (10). Danticat acknowledges the extreme physical dangers for some who risk "arrest, or execution" by reading under the rule of powerful dictators like Stalin and Duvalier as well as the more subtle intellectual or ideological dangers all readers face when they pick up a book that may and often does transform them. Danticat does not equate these risks. Remembering the public executions that framed her parents' early lives in the Haiti of Duvalier, she writes, "My stories do not hold a candle to having lived under a dictatorship for most of your adult life, to having neighbors disappear and not being able even to acknowledge it, to being forced to act as though these neighbors never existed at all. Reading, and perhaps writing, is nothing like living in a place and time where two very young men are killed in a way that is treated like entertainment" (12). And yet, in her profound generosity Danticat is able to take seriously the dangers that more quietly shape so many lives, including her own. In this world of quiet danger, reading is a risky affair; it is a "revolt against silence," an invitation for a chorus of unfamiliar voices to change us. The risk is real, but as Danticat concludes, "[W]e have no other choice" (20). Readers, like creators, are not called to lives of security or stability. They are called into the dangerous work of transformation. While institutions work toward long-term sustainability of finances, curriculum, and mission, Danticat's essay, taken as an institutional text, can remind us that we are not called to security. As institutions who read dangerously we are called to risky acts of reconciliation; we are called to relinquish the power that has come

through systems of white privilege and white power and to forge radical new anti-racist alliances that must inevitably transform us.

I teach Danticat and Adichie's reading stories across wildly different classes, most often in foundational reading classes, including an interdisciplinary first-year seminar and the research methods class for first-year English majors. I now wonder what would come if we made these texts like Walker's foundational reading not only for students but for our institution. How might these powerful black women, prolific readers, bold writers, and demanding teachers, armed only with their words, lead us into the dangerous and vital work of racial reckoning and reconciliation?

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