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## **Social Ills of (Global) Capitalism under Scrutiny in American Literature Classes: “Teaching to Transgress”\***

### **ABSTRACT**

The article foregrounds the importance of honing critical literacy through socially engaged literature. Dealing with literature in an engaged and critical way can help students to develop critical thinking skills and a systemic understanding of burning social issues that inform their own living realities. Critical literary pedagogy and socially engaged literature play a key role in developing students' understanding of why and how institutional racism and institutional patriarchy constitute key operating mechanisms of capitalist social relations, which is why constructs of race and gender should never be looked upon as mere add-ons, let alone as a matter of mere culture and hence individual prejudice. In this sense, the article directly challenges the prevailing postmodernist approach in mainstream studies and teachings of literature. It calls instead for the restoration of socially engaged literature to school curricula and for a return to the contextually analytical and systemic (materialist) approach towards literature.

**Keywords:** capitalism; institutional racism; institutional patriarchy; socially engaged literature; critical pedagogy

## **Zlá (globalnega) kapitalizma pod kritičnim drobnogledom skozi obravnavo ameriške književnosti: »Učenje s preseganjem«**

### **POVZETEK**

Članek izpostavlja vlogo in pomen družbeno angažirane literature in kritične pedagogike pri vzpostavljanju družbene ozaveščenosti in kritične pismenosti med študirajočo populacijo. Kritična pedagogika in družbeno angažirana literatura imata moč, da spodbujata kontekstualno obravnavo vprašanj, s katerimi se ukvarjajo dela, in da ponudita sistemsko razdelani vpogled v razumevanje institucionalnega patriarhata in rasizma kot operativnega mehanizma kapitalističnega sistema. To predstavlja odmik od ozkoglednega in depasiranega razumevanja rasizma in seksizma kot izrastka osebnih predsodkov, saj gre tu za depolitizirano zamenjavo posledic z vzroki. S tem presežemo omejitve in zablode, ki jih na področju literarnih študij in pedagoškega posredovanja predstavlja kulturni preobrat s poudarkom na postmodernističnem pristopu. Članek tako zagovarja nujno po povrnitvi družbeno angažirane literature v fakultetne predavalnice in nujnost sistematično kontekstualnega pristopa do njene obravnave.

**Ključne besede:** kapitalizem; institucionalni rasizem; institucionalni patriarhat; družbeno angažirana literatura; kritična pedagogika

\* This part of the title has been inspired by bell hook's influential book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge: New York and London, 1994).

# Social Ills of (Global) Capitalism under Scrutiny in American Literature Classes: “Teaching to Transgress”

## 1 Introduction

Literature, be it realistic or fantastic, does not exist in a vacuum. Far from being self-enclosed and escapist, literary works are firmly rooted in concrete everyday realities, for it is from these that they draw their basic ideas and concepts, and which they feed back into the system in their refurbished, reconstructed or regurgitated forms. Because literary works are embedded in specific historical contexts and social relations, which in turn inform their content and form (Eagleton 2002, 5–6), literature is one of the discursive ways in which social reality is constantly addressed and reinstated. Literature therefore represents a form of communication with reality (Sell 2002) and constitutes an indispensable part of social discourse (Achinger 2012). As such, it actively shapes our perception and understanding of the world alongside its underlying social structures and accompanying symbolic orders. This in turn makes literature one of the pivotal tools of an ongoing and broader socialization (among adults and youngsters alike) and “an integral part of a social structure” (Rice and Waugh 2001, 103). The understanding of literature as a social discourse is also a key ingredient of critical pedagogy, which rests on the cultivation of critical literacy through systemic and contextually embedded analyses of literature in general and socially engaged literature in particular.

Because works of fiction spring from specific socio-historical contexts, it is impossible for narratives not to build their worlds and subject positions without at least invoking, directly or indirectly, the socio-economic systems and concrete materializations in which they themselves are embedded. In the context of the global re-imposition of the capitalist order, it is more than imperative for critical literary pedagogy and socially engaged literary studies to keep in the foreground the fact that in this kind of social setting, literary texts can play completely different, even mutually exclusionary roles. By merely incorporating unexamined “values and preoccupations, beliefs and prejudices” (Bennet and Royle 2004, 177) of the system premised on systemic exploitation and structural oppression into their literary worlds, some works of fiction inevitably act as guardians and gatekeepers of this very same and by now globally re-entrenched social order. In contrast, very few other literary works will put emphasis on “knowledge and social structures” (Bennet and Royle 2004, 177) to act as conveyors of much needed systemic and essential insights. Socially engaged literary texts can therefore act as welcome and much needed examiners and challengers of the unjust capitalist system, providing a springboard for fostering critical understanding and social awareness (Eagleton and Milne 1996). Within the field of critical literary pedagogy, in other words, attention is necessarily drawn to the fact that literary texts partake in the globally re-imposed capitalist reality either by variously supporting and legitimizing the differential power relations based on class, and further reinforced through constructs of race and gender, or by exposing and challenging the very production of structural inequalities, pointing in the process to their (socio-economic) origins and to the ideological mechanisms that help to sustain them. For this purpose, critical literary pedagogy differentiates between the concept of ideation on one hand and ideology on the other (Eagleton 1991), avoiding in this way the pitfalls of mainstream literary criticism according to which everything and anything – that is, any kind of talk about social organization regardless of its goals and structural features – is already an ideology. Critical

pedagogy instead understands ideology to be a system of manipulation that subsists on churning out constructions of artificial difference and inferiority, on inventing and inscribing otherness, and on presenting and rationalizing such constructs and fake hierarchies as natural realities precisely in order to justify and entrench the capitalist system's exploitative social relations.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, informed critical literary pedagogy necessarily draws on post-colonial studies, world-system theory, Marxist and socialist theory and systemic feminist studies.

An interdisciplinary approach like this, and the systemic acquisition of this kind of knowledge among students through the critical lens of socially engaged literature, requires a sustained effort on the part of teachers committed to critical analytical pedagogy. Its aim is to help students to develop a contextual understanding of complex social issues raised in and through novels and to acquire analytical techniques necessary for the cultivation of synthetic insights and critical literacy on their own. The Early American literature classes and seminars on American literature that students attend in their first year of studies at the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana are geared towards facilitating and fostering this kind of analytical thinking through contextual and systemic analysis of socially engaged American literature. In these courses, students learn step by step that racialized and gendered constructs of otherness lie at the heart of the Western capitalist social orders and their imperialist projects. Contrary to common belief heavily promoted by the liberal mainstream, students come to see that contemporary forms of Western racism and patriarchy are not self-originating and independent systems that supposedly simply run alongside capitalism, intersecting with it only occasionally or even accidentally. This kind of contextual understanding is crucial. Rather than racism and sexism being just a matter of individual prejudice and discrimination, categories of race and gender – which are subject to constant modifications and modernizations within the context of the global consolidation of capitalist social order – continue to be essential to the maintenance of institutionalized racism and institutionalized patriarchy (premised on the breadwinner model) in Western capitalist nation states. Both institutional patriarchy and racism have been key structural features and central operating mechanisms of the Western capitalist system since its inception. The maintenance of these two has played a central role in the orchestrated pursuit of the greater accumulation of private wealth concentrated primarily in the hands of the top few beneficiaries of the system. Both institutionalized racism and patriarchy should therefore be seen as subsets of capitalist socio-economic relations rather than seemingly separate ones or even separate cultural phenomena. They are capitalism's building blocks: they play a key role in the hierarchical stratification, divisive segmentation and further devaluation of the legally exploited labour force, naturalizing the super-exploitation of those constituted as gendered and

<sup>1</sup> Mainstream literary criticism, dominated by the cultural turn and postmodernist literary studies that speak of meanings as always already fragmented and elusive or endlessly deferred and beyond meaningful recovery, is a major disadvantage when it comes to fostering critical literacy. Postmodernist literary theory views literary texts as self-enclosed systems of language games with meanings supposedly being “decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic” (Eagleton 1996, vii) and never fully or really there. Mainstream literary criticism does not view literature as a part of a larger social structure, let alone as “an embodiment of social ideology or a critique of it” (Eagleton and Milne 1996, 11). In place of in-depth and systemic understanding of the issues at hand, it breeds apathy and conformity to the system, whose proponents (via think-tanks, foundations and other outlets) are ironically heavily focused on the production and circulation of very specific meanings, by means of which imperial occupations are justified, exploitation naturalized and camouflaged as a form of freedom and democracy, and racism and sexism subtly promulgated most often under the neo-racial pretext of colour-blindness and under the postfeminist rubric of promoting disempowering constructs of femininity as women's personal empowerment (Jha 2016; McRobbie 2009).

racialized others (Spector 2014, 120–22). In this sense, the students' understanding of racial and gendered discourses and their concrete material effects is tied to a broader yet basic socio-historical framework. This kind of basic contextualization is crucial for students' acquisition of social awareness and functional knowledge, on the basis of which they are not only better able to connect seemingly isolated issues into a larger picture but also to recognize the way these paradigms are being transplanted into their own immediate social milieu. Only through developing this kind of complex and contextual understanding are they better able to also fight the ideology and resist the harmful processes exported to this corner of the world under the demands and auspices of the globally the re-entrenched capitalist order.

## **2 Institutional Racism and Patriarchy through Socially Engaged Literature: Getting to Grips with the Basic Socio-historical Context**

### **2.1 Racism**

As pointed out by postcolonial theorists and historians, European imperial expansion and consolidation of the capitalist order was marked by the invention of modern biological or scientific racism, which was used to justify the dispossession of the local populations, their extermination or enslavement and exploitation (Thompson 2013). Racism as an ideology rests on the grounds of systemic othering, which rests on stripping people of the attributes of their humanity. Scientific racism, an export product of Western imperial powers, was used as a key ideology: for the first time in modern history, skin colour was taken as an object of negative projections and inscriptions of imaginary insufficiencies to be associated with the people the West was to colonize, dispossess and exploit. In this process, a neutral biological characteristic was turned into a socially re-inscribed one to be invested with negative projections on the basis of which an entire group of people, primarily through denial of reason, would be re-defined as inadequate and an aberration from the human norm (a standard thus appropriated and preserved for the whites).<sup>2</sup> In this way, the West would rationalize the imposition of object status upon its newly racialized others, justifying and naturalizing their utter exploitation. African and African-American slave labour became one of the driving engines of capital accumulation and a hidden prerequisite for the consolidation of capitalist production in Europe (Mullings 2005, 671). In this respect, as aptly observed by Taylor, “constructs of biological and cultural inferiority of African-Americans are as old as the US itself: how else could the political and economic elite of the US rationalize enslaving Africans [and the genocide of Native Americans] at the same time that they were simultaneously championing the rights of men” (2016, 23) for the upper crust of white British aristocracy and American businessmen in the making. And because racism, as Taylor further reminds us, is not “an abstract idea molded in isolation from the wider phenomenon of economic exploitation and inequality that pervades all of American [and Western capitalist] society” but rather structurally or “intimately bound up with them” (2016, 194), the abolition of “capitalist slavery” (Mullings 2005, 672) did not signal the end of institutional and systemic racism. This institution continues to be crucial for the US and its top elite, the system's direct beneficiary: it guarantees the continual supply of extra cheap and controllable workforce (Pessin 2016). This is also why constructs about the inferiority of African-Americans and newly racialized groups continue to be perpetuated in an open or disguised manner.

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<sup>2</sup> Students seem to find Jane Elliot's documentary *The Bluest Eye* to be most conducive towards their understanding of how these constructs are made and put into place.

The students' most powerful recognition of the symbiotic and structural relationship between racism and capitalism arises from their dealing with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This novel dissects the history of the Middle Passage and the slave plantation system, and traces the incorporation of freed African-Americans into the Northern version of "racial capitalism" after the abolition of slavery (Childs 2009, 294). The plight of African-Americans, who as free but racialized wage-slave labour are confined to the lowest occupational ranks of the industrial sector in steel manufacturing and the meat industry or pressed into the domestic service of whites, is aptly captured in the passage which describes a young girl being given a job as a domestic in the household of her abolitionist benefactors. Upon leaving the house after just landing the job, the girl's eyes lock with the eyes of a figurine standing on a shelf in the kitchen where she was to conduct her daily chores. The figurine is a symbolic reminder and enforcer of her real standing in the white household, which is a micro cosmos reflecting the social structuration and positioning of racialized others as wage-slaves in the broader context of the so-called "racial capitalism":

With those assurances, Denver left, but not before she had seen, sitting on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins or crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words "At Yo Service." (Morrison 1987, 225)

With this understanding kept in mind – that is, that institutional racism is central to capital accumulation – students also come to see why it was not a coincidence that slavery was replaced by the economy of so-called convict leasing, with labour supply now again recruited exclusively from African-Americans. In this way, the official myth that racial discrimination ended with slavery and the received notion that racial prejudices still persistent today are just an old remnant of the past going back to the period of slavery (and are supposedly in no way connected with later history or the current state of affairs in the US) are both rendered problematic and dispelled.

Imprisoned in large numbers for minor or imaginary offenses (such as not being contracted to white employers and found loitering after their working hours), African-Americans at the turn of the century constituted an even cheaper supply of captive labour in comparison to the former system of slavery, as there would be no overhead costs involved for the capital (Taylor 2016, 111). Convict-labour leasing also represents the beginning of the criminalization of black poverty and racializing of crime, that is, "the practice of linking crime to blacks as a racial group, but not whites ... in the name of securing a stable [prison] workforce" (Taylor 2016, 120) for white capital, with "rampant exploitation of Black labour" thus again being "contingent on the denigration of Black humanity" (Taylor 2016, 119). Students get to know that well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African-Americans were excluded as a group from social security programmes and other benefit schemes under the New Deal. After WWII, they were not allowed to move into suburban districts the government subsidized in an effort to give rise to the white middle-class. Instead, African-Americans remained housed in segregated urban areas (where schools were to be deliberately underfunded) with restricted access to social housing, which allowed private landlords "to charge Black tenants more for inferior housing" while "refusing to maintain their properties" in order to drive the profit margin up (Taylor 2016, 113). Pointedly, in line

with the racist devaluation and dehumanization of black life, white America interpreted the “rat infestation and health problems” that resulted from such impossible living conditions to be the result of “Black people’s inferior hygiene instead of the racist-capitalist manipulation of the housing market” (Taylor 2016, 113). The conditions created by government policies like these would push African-Americans into taking out subprime loans at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which the speculative banking industry would target especially at African-Americans as the poorest among the poor. The industry made its money by charging higher interest rates than for ordinary, that is, prime loans, and by levying extra fees on delayed instalments, knowing from the start that these loans could never be paid off (Abdur-Rahman 2008, 42). Racism is the building block of the capitalist system, which is why it is systemic and structural rather than merely individual: primarily, it “can be defined as policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans.” (Taylor 2016, 19)

One of the key realizations made by students in the classes on socially engaged American literature is that at “the root of modern racism is exploitation” (Spector 2014, 121), and that “[i]n the United States, as contemporary racialized groups were incorporated by conquest and/or labor exploitation, the state created and maintained racial hierarchies and racialized citizenship” (Mullings 2005, 673) so that even fewer social-economic rights could be granted to those constructed as racialized others. Systemic racism plays a structural role in creating and securing a continuous supply of unprotected and easily controllable workforce, while driving an artificial wedge between those who should stand united in their struggle for their basic rights regardless of their skin colour. In this sense, the instigation of racial hatred and media-driven implantation of racist constructs and attitudes in the minds of the rest of the not so visibly but in fact also exploited and oppressed population serves as a tool of manipulation. It creates an atmosphere of terror directed at those at the receiving end of racist policies while crucially averting attention away from real social problems and their structural origins, which in reality also constrict those who believe themselves to be the beneficiaries of imaginary white privilege and therefore supposedly exempt from oppression. In her review of Taylor’s *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, Pessin correctly points out that “racism is not an aberrational atrocity in an otherwise equal or just society, but is central to obscuring the greater inequality that exists within the United States [and other Western countries] as a whole” (2016, n. p.). These insights become crucial also for students’ understanding of their local environment at the present moment.

## 2.2 The Students’ Perspective

We are witness to the implantation and spread of racism in countries which were once at the head of the Non-aligned movement and which were deeply dedicated to the fight against colonialism and racism, as this was an indispensable part of their socialist agenda. The kind of education the older and middle-aged generations received on these issues stands in stark contrast to the discourse and lack of education that the media and the establishment put into circulation today. The insights gained by students into the origins and the workings of racism through our dealings with socially engaged literature turn out to be of crucial importance for their own understanding of the so-called refugee crisis. Equipped with the historically contextual and structural understanding of racism they gain in their literature classes, they are better able to not only fully grasp the larger framework within which the so-called refugee crisis is being produced but to also act on this knowledge and thus operate in their own local environments to the best of their abilities as a counterforce to the official stigmatizing discourse. In this sense, rather than



being prey to racism (and nationalism), they can see through the political establishment's scare tactics and media distortions, drawing attention to the mechanisms of racial othering also for others. Students report that what they learn in their literature classes they also very often share with their circle of friends and family members. When dealing with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, students in the Anglo-American feminist literary studies group were asked to connect the issue of institutionalized racism that the novel dissects by deconstructing the Eurocentric racialized and gendered paradigm of the beauty myth to the situation they are faced with in their own social milieu.

## 2.3 Students' Responses

Students came up with insightful and meaningful responses, which in terms of content analysis fall roughly into two sections. The responses in the first section show that students are not only perfectly capable of seeing through the "fear mongering" and the "extreme othering" of the refugees but that they are also able to connect this with the West's new brand of a more perfidious form of racism, so-called cultural racism, which is used to prop up and justify the contemporary imperialist agendas which lie at the root of people's suffering and displacement. At the same time, in their analyses students recognize that the geopolitical space of which they themselves are part has been subject to the spread and heavy propagation of nationalism after 1991, with both nationalism and racism sharing a common ideological trait, that is, othering. From this point on, their responses show the ways in which students understand cultural racism to work, and how it ties in with the imperial agendas of the powers that use fear-mongering as a disciplinary discourse among their own population and as a vehicle for producing a marginalized, extremely vulnerable and hence thoroughly exploitable category of people.

### SECTION 1

Student A:

*In fact, what the media are doing is fear mongering. They portray the European culture as a stable, unified and justified (sometimes explicitly through religion) entity and the immigrants as the other, a violent foreign force that is here to destroy the foundations on which European culture is built. This in turn creates a binary opposition where there is none: Europe is not a melting pot, there is no single European culture, nor should the immigrants be labelled as dire Muslim extremists on their way to take over the world.*

Student B:

*Slovenia is to some extent dealing with a different kind of problem. Police brutality towards a certain race is minimal ... This could be the consequence of not having the racial diversity the USA, for example, has. However, this does not mean we are not dealing with similar problems. Our issues perhaps focus more on various ethnic groups, such as the Roma people and people of different former Yugoslav countries. These issues have been around since ... independence.*

*In the past years, Slovenia along with the rest of EU has been facing the European migrant crisis which largely increased racist beliefs in our area. The western invasions of these countries, a consequence of which to some extent is the migrant crisis, has sent people into exile. It is hypocritical of our policies [sic] to not accept these migrants after contributing to their move in the first place. While many people initially wouldn't have issues with immigrants, mass media is greatly increasing and in many cases creating these racist beliefs.*

Student D:

*Slovenia is already severely burdened by a nationalistic, conservative, and church-driven ideology, which makes the population even more prone to discrimination against people of different race, nation or religion. ... The EU actively participated in establishing a sinister atmosphere ... By allowing member states to erect fences along their national borders ..., the EU actively participated in portraying the refugees as people with bad intentions. By doing so, the EU contributed to the rise of racism and nationalism in times when they are least needed.*

Student C:

*Europeans have constantly been trying to show how they are better than the Americans but it turns out that racism is just as much alive in Europe as in America. ... All Muslims were suddenly marked as terrorists and all refugees were [presented as though they were] here with a hidden agenda ... "All Muslims are bad", and "Europe will be destroyed" were two most commonly uttered phrases during the most critical times of the migrations. This is racism in its most typical and distinctive form, and people don't even realize it. Mass media is the main transmitter of these ideas. They have started to spread the fear ... although the real threat comes from the western superpowers and their greedy tendencies to get whatever they want with no regard for other people. They started this war because of their own interests and now when people are suffering because of it, they want to transfer the blame on them.*

Student G:

*Together with the strict policies of the EU, the media played a crucial role in implanting fear and hatred of refugees into the hearts and minds of the European people. ... the results are the extreme othering, with a great number of Europeans convinced they are not in any way obliged to help the affected peoples since they are just terrorists anyway, and the legitimization of war in the Middle East under the pretext of uprooting terrorism.*

Student E:

*The refugees are seen as the Other. Even though they were forced to leave their home countries because of the conflicts that were in the main part caused by the imperialist interference of western countries into their politics with the intent to put into power political allies or puppets that would grant them access to the area's natural wealth. ... Despite the fact that as Slovenians (and therefore Slavs), we would also be perceived as unwanted immigrants in many Western countries, a large number of the Slovenian population bought into the image of refugees as the ungrateful economic migrants that the West painted.*

## SECTION 2

Student F:

*The refugee crisis has been widely publicized ... As a creed, Islam is perceived as a major threat to other religions, namely, Christianity. The image that the corporate media disseminates shows the Islamic religion as very strict, conservative and one in which violence is often used for punishing disobedience ... In this respect, the Catholic Church is presented as a positive counterpart to Islam although the same description fits the Catholic Church just the same. Both religions also prop up the patriarchal social order, where the gendered position and the subjection of women is seen as something natural. ... The problem is also labelling all refugees as potential terrorists, who could wreak chaos all over Europe ... The hysteria about terrorist attack has been present since the 9/11 and is fuelled by the mainstream media. However, one*



*must always question the reasons for such drastic actions. Overall, the white “majority” has been dominating, colonizing and oppressing the countries of the third world for the longest time. ... Like any minority, the refugees are definitely being presented as the Other, someone who is on the opposite side of the scale in every aspect, be it social, or cultural, and the differences are often presented as insurmountable, which cements the minority in a rigid socioeconomic status.*

Student H:

*There is no doubt that Western imperial interests are to blame for the recent flow of refugees into Europe. We (meaning the developed Western world) are to blame for the wars that forced millions of people from their homes. Yet far from accepting responsibility and helping our fellow humans, the refugee crisis is being used to create new, sharper demarcation lines between ethnic groups and usher in a new era of racism. ... I believe there is something more going on here than politicians using fear mongering to gather support. We are living in a time when capital and corporations, not states are becoming the dominant power structures. Cheap labour force with as few rights as possible is the lifeblood of capital. Refugees represent just that. By marginalizing them, through racist constructs and portraying them as the enemy, the millions of refugees are being placed in a position where they are easily exploited. ... By pushing them to the furthest margins, almost completely out of sight, we also deny them basic rights that are afforded to every member in our society. Thus we have set the stage for the creation of a new class, one that is even lower than our already miserable lower classes. A class of invisible slaves.*

Students arrived at these insights on their own, yet they would not exist in this kind of form or content had it not been at least partially for the systemic acquisition of knowledge they received on these issues through close engagement with socially engaged American literature throughout their studies. This points to the crucial role critical literary pedagogy can play by focusing on a systemic and sustained investigation of the social issues raised in socially engaged literature.

## 2.4 Patriarchy

If institutional racism is one of the key structural features of capitalism and driving mechanisms of profit accumulation in Western capitalist states, so is institutional patriarchy. Students come to learn this through the analysis of works of fiction such as Alcott’s *Little Women*, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*, Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and more systemically in their Anglo-American feminist studies, one such moment being when we return to *The Bluest Eye* via Churchill’s *Top Girls*. One of the first systemic and historical understandings gained by the students is that the rise of industrial capitalism was premised upon the domestication and housewifization (Prügl 1996) of women. Industrial capitalism namely “put into place new patriarchal structures and ideologies” (Mies 1998, ix), most notably the institution of the nuclear patriarchal family, the breadwinner model and the doctrine of two separate spheres of private and public domains. Within this setup, social reproductive work and women were to be confined to the latter. Capitalism rests on the redefinition of social reproductive work (such as child-care and elderly care) as non-work and as a matter of private and individual concern rather than social and collective responsibility. It insists on women doing this kind of work out of love and for free solely within the confines of their homes, arguably as a natural extension of their femininity (Federici 2014, 8). By keeping this kind of work in the private sphere (through various institutional mechanisms such as limited public care facilities and long and unpaid maternity and parental leaves), capital can expropriate a much bigger share of the common wealth created by its workers for itself instead of diverting it towards the creation and

maintenance of an extensive network of full-time and affordable nurseries, kindergartens and after-school care facilities as well as fully employed and professionally trained child-minders, which would benefit communities and enable women to work full-time.

That is why after WWII, capitalist states, in stark contrast to the socialist ones, merely modified the breadwinner model to the so-called 1.5 version. Low-income and middle-income women have been most frequently encouraged either to leave their employment completely after the birth of their first child, or to combine the burden of fulltime childcare with precarious and sporadic forms of employment such as temporary, part-time or home-based work for mothers. Part-time work, let alone home-based work, “neither promotes [women’s] financial autonomy nor relieves them from being chiefly responsible for childcare” and housework (Ciccia and Bleyenbergh 2014, 8). In fact, part-time work for women in the US does not come with social benefits and entitlement to unpaid maternity leave, one of the earliest forms of precarious work targeted specifically at women. As a result, women’s full-time employment in the formal sector and their socio-economic independence in capitalist patriarchies has been the preserve of only a handful of women in the West. Their exit out of domesticity has most often proceeded on “the basis of the broadening of informal feminine working conditions in the home economy” (Sauer and Wohl 2011, 117). That is, it has proceeded on the backs of racialized minority women and immigrant women who, once recruited into these insecure and unprotected domestic jobs, find themselves marginalized and locked up in even more exploitative semi-formal or informal arrangements than their mistresses in the formal economy. Their unprotected working conditions depend entirely on the “circumstances and whims” of their private in-household employers (Busch 2013, 541). In the more recent history of the US, Latin-American migrant women have replaced African-American women as nannies and domestic servants in middle and upper-class households, with African-American women being diverted into part-time jobs in the public or private service sector. As racialized and underpaid labour of immigrant women is pressed into private service to alleviate the burden of social reproduction for well-to-do women, the question is what happens with these women’s own childcare arrangements in a capitalist racial patriarchy where an extensive network of institutionalized and affordable childcare is underdeveloped or so underfunded as to be virtually non-existent. In 2010 for example, public childcare facilities in the US could accommodate only 4% of the children between three and four years of age whose mothers were employed (Gornick and Hegewisch 2015, 22). This is an issue that we encounter in both *The Bluest Eye*, where African-American women and their children are left to their own devices, and in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.

Cisneros’s work of fiction tangentially addresses some of the basic structural problems that shape the social realities and individual trajectories of Mexican-American immigrant women who find themselves racialized and cooped up inside a ghetto/barrio. Amongst the most explicit vignettes dealing with institutionalized capitalist patriarchy is the story about Marin, a Puerto-Rican girl who is staying with her aunt’s family in Chicago. Marin is a teenager who “can’t come out” of the house to talk or play with the younger children from the neighbourhood (Cisneros 1991, 23–24). A few pages later it transpires that the main protagonist and her sister “never see Marin” because she must stay indoors and mind the children “until her aunt comes home from work”, most probably from “downtown” or some other affluent white district “because that’s where all the best jobs are” (Cisneros 1991, 26). Students thus come to see that in order to secure any kind of employment, including that of a domestic maid or nanny in the affluent suburbs, racialized and poor women in such economies are forced to pass childcare on to other members in the family, elderly parents, aunts and sisters, or pass it on to the oldest daughters in the family.

This increases the strain on their minimal resources and time management, while transferring childcare to the oldest daughters in the family increases their chances of ending up as school dropouts (Harris 2004). Yet, with the majority of Latin-Americans living under the constant threat of deportation, this kind of marginal existence that Marin is reduced to is even more precarious and unstable.

Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* also brings up the issue of the Bracero program and with it, the way secondary and racialized economic status is legally imposed upon Latin-American migrants. Their secondary status derives from being officially labelled as temporary non-immigrant workers. This kind of categorization means that they can be "legally exempted from laws on minimum employment standards, collective bargaining and the provision of social services and programs such as unemployment insurance, social assistance, old age pensions, etc." (Sharma 2001, 427). And, just as importantly, to legally enter the US Latin-Americans, unlike other groups entering the US, must already be contracted to their employers, most often agribusinesses, and are required to put in at least six months of trial work before they can change their employer otherwise they lose the money they have earned. Immigration policies and conditions attached to legal entry into the US provide a backdoor for rampant exploitation. Students get to know the specifics of this system in our dealing with Russell Banks' *Rule of the Bone*, where a white teenage boy narrator teams up with an elderly Jamaican man. He serves as a mentor to the boy and this is what the reader gets to see through the eyes of his pupil, who undergoes a major re-education:

The deal was they were supposed to work on the apple trees in the spring and then in June the same crew was supposed to go to Florida on a bus and cut sugarcane all summer for a different company and come back north in the fall and pick apples. Once you signed on you couldn't quit until six months were up without losing all the money that you'd earned so far and your work permit so if you left the camp you were like an international outlaw, an illegal alien plus you were broke. (Banks 1996, 155–56)

### 3 Conclusion

In their dealings with socially engaged American literature, students come to see that government-endorsed deportation regimes play a crucial role in governing the racialized secondary status and the debased working conditions of Latin-American immigrants, while the profit-driven privatized prison-industrial complex ensures the ongoing racialization and hence the controllability and pliability of the labour of African-Americans as US citizens. Through such investigations, students come to realize that both institutional racism and institutional patriarchy are operating mechanisms and building blocks of a concrete socio-political system rather than detached and self-enclosed phenomena. Or, as put by Mullings (2005, 675, 668), students come to see that both "racialized and gendered labour forces continue to be central to old and new forms of accumulation" with racism and gendered oppression "linked to structures of power that emerge through processes of accumulation and dispossession within local and transnational contexts". This is of primary importance for students' holistic and in-depth understanding of socially engaged literature in the seminar on feminist literary studies as well, where they learn to view gender constructs as intricately tied to institutional racism and vice versa, rather than as separate categories that mainstream literary criticism introduces and leaves hanging on as mere add-ons.

One of the many meaningful insights gained and voiced by students in American literature classes and in the Feminist literary seminar is that far from helping to address these issues the election of a “technically black” president (Street 2009, xxxvi, 103) on a colour-blind platform served to sweep them under the carpet. It camouflaged structural inequalities and allowed them to mushroom in the midst of the economic crisis. This also explains the emergence of the #Blacklivesmatter movement during the spontaneous and massive uprisings against police brutality in urban district areas across the US. It was here that “municipalities and state legislatures [often headed by black mayors] cut social services and critical aspects of the public sector intended to mitigate the worst aspects of poverty”, while at the same time they would send in police troops “to clean up the consequences” (Taylor 2016, 123). Their task was to “police poverty while instilling fear” and to help fill up the municipal coffers (depleted by lower taxes for the capital and the rich) by imposing more and heavier fines on the residents for minor or invented traffic offences through increasing “the practice of race-based stops” (Taylor 2016, 123, 125). Critical literary pedagogy that takes socially engaged literature as its springboard for the investigation and systemic understanding of burning social issues can produce enlightened outcomes even in a short period of time. As noted by one of the students in our feminist literary classes: “Electing a black president enabled the American people to feel progressive without actually dismantling the racist structures in place in their society.”

This article has been concerned with the demonstration of how social issues are to be addressed in literature classes through an integrated systemic approach and how socially engaged American literature should be contextualized and taught without falling prey to postmodernist relativism and the so-called cultural turn. Critical pedagogy, which rests on the cultivation of systemic understandings and in-depth contextual analyses of the social reality referenced by and through literature, is a potential building block of future grassroots movements and the informed struggle for systemic and wholesome, rather than partial, and co-opted social justice. Students’ informed responses and the contextualized understandings they gained in such classes are living proof that language acquisition and literature teaching, in order to be meaningful for the social formation of students and pupils alike, need to go beyond mechanistic linguistic approaches or superficially descriptive and plot-oriented approaches towards literature. Critical literary pedagogy, with its focus on systemic contextualized analysis and informed understanding of social injustices, serves as a clarion call for literature and language classes alike to become more rather than less context-oriented.

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