

Dr. Maritime's comments to the Upper School on Monday, November 3, 2008.

Last spring I taught a senior elective entitled "Narrating Racial Conflict" in which we read books and watched films about racism in America. I want to read two short excerpts this morning.

The first is from Toni Morrison's 1987 novel Beloved. Toni Morrison is a contemporary African American female author. I know some in the senior class read this extraordinary book last year. It tells the story of the terrible action a recently escaped slave woman performs in order to keep her children free. In this passage an African American male character reflects on how racism affects everyone involved:

Very few had died in bed, like Baby Sugs, and none that he knew of, including Baby, had lived a livable life. Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe. In addition to having to use their heads to get ahead, they had the weight of the whole race sitting there. You needed two heads for that. Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (234)

The second passage is shorter and comes from Faulkner's 1940 novel Go Down Moses. Faulkner is a white male author from the first half of the twentieth century. This moment comes from the end of the book. An old man, whom we have come to know throughout the novel as an enlightened character who gave up his inheritance in part because his ancestors owned slaves, realizes that the woman who wishes to marry one of his white relatives is part African American. His response is as follows:

Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America, he thought. But not now! Not now!

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States of America is, for many of us in this room, a monumental occasion that we did not know we would see in our lifetimes. When I was your age, 20 years ago, racial conflict was very present. There were riots in Los Angeles, Spike Lee's seminal film Do The Right Thing

about a fictional race riot in Brooklyn came out in 1990 and 4 years later racial conflict again entered the national conversation through the O.J. Simpson Trial.

It is safe to say, that this election is an emotionally charged event for many people. Over the past week I have heard of several remarks made about the difficulty some people have accepting the idea of an African American president. And people are entitled to express themselves as long as they are not harassing or threatening others. However, if you choose to make inflammatory statements regarding race, you should expect that you will be responded to. I am not saying that every racist remark will be met with a disciplinary response, but you will have many conversations about your words.

Buffalo is a fairly segregated city. Living here influences every one of us. A few years ago my car broke down outside of New Jersey and a white tow truck driver and I had about an hour to talk as he drove me to a service station. I mentioned to him that Buffalo was about to elect its first black mayor, and this white working class guy from New Jersey couldn't believe how backward we were. "Really," he said? "Your first black mayor?"

As you know our honor code contains the following words:

"I pledge to respect and foster the ideals of diversity in our school."

We strive to create a community in which all are equally accepted. Are we there yet? Is everyone in this room free from all racist thoughts? No. But as a school our mission is to educate. And we will continue to do so through thoughtful conversation. If you hear something you don't like, let someone know. Don't take matters in to your own hands. Issues surrounding race are often too sensitive to take on alone. The adults at Nichols are here to help you have these difficult conversations with your peers.

Please reflect on your words before you speak if you know they may hurt or offend. Thank you to all in this room who do so each day.