

“Loving Blackness to Death”: (Re)Imagining ELA Classrooms in a Time of Racial Chaos

In this article, the authors argue that the racial violence that unfolds against Black youth in various communities seeps into ELA classrooms. They contend educators must begin to reimagine ELA classrooms as revolutionary sites that disrupt racial injustice while striving to transform the world and humanize the lives of Black youth.

America has an intimate relationship with racial violence. To explicate, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz posits the historical process of European colonization was an act of violence against Black¹ bodies, which included the physical and mental abuse that frequently transpired during the slave trade. More importantly, the legacy of racial violence has been ongoing and problematic since that time. The work of Henry Louis Gates and Frantz Fanon delineates the experiences Black youth, men, and women encountered during chattel slavery. As such, the infliction of physical violence such as lynching, police brutality, and state and vigilante violence are common threads that are nicely stitched throughout many historical time periods (e.g., Reconstruction, Peonage, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement). We are in agreement with Cheryl E. Matias that, “although the state of colonization, as framed by Memmi, is above all, economic and political exploitation, it is also a spiritual, emotional, and humanistic exploitation” (165). Therefore, the past and ongoing legacy of racial violence that is wrapped in colonization degrades, dehumanizes, and brings trauma to the hearts and minds of Black people and the generations to follow.

It is a staunchly held myth in American society, in particular public education, that the horrific acts of violence (lynching, rape, etc.) are relegated to the dark annals of history. Therefore, society cannot become comatose to racial incidents from the past; instead, we must understand how America’s violent past currently haunts and informs the recent racial attacks against Black bodies (LA Riots,

Jena Six, stop-and-frisk, racial profiling, mass incarceration, #SayHerName, and Black Lives Matter Movement, just to name a few). As such, “our work today is evidence of the unfinished status of planetary struggles for equality, justice, and freedom” (Davis 82).

We argue the racial violence that unfolds in various communities seeps into English language arts (ELA) classrooms. To be clear, the physical violence that stems from racial discrimination transpires from the (mis)reading of Black people’s bodies. Furthermore, the notions of physical and symbolic violence are interconnected with the racism that rests within the English language. According to Joyce King, the Western world has intentionally made everything black to symbolize all that is evil and bad (e.g., black sheep, blacklist, Black Death, and black devil). Most symbols and words that are associated with white symbolize purity and cleanliness (e.g., “white as snow,” “little white lie,” and “that’s very white of you”). For this reason, the language used to describe Black bodies derives from disdain, disrespect, and devaluation of Black people. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Jordan Davis, Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Renisha McBride are a few names that make it quite clear Black youth are losing their bodies and lives because of deficit-oriented and pathologizing ideologies society has about them. Although physical violence against unarmed Black youth happens in the streets, “the idea of violence against non-white bodies begins in the classroom” (Cridland-Hughes and King 100). Symbolic violence is the cornerstone of the physical violence that plagues

US society. Within the context of P-20 classrooms, symbolic violence is an attack on the humanity of Black students. We, the authors, know all too well the stereotypical language and ideologies that lead to the unjust murders of Black youth. At the same time that we believe Black youths' physical deaths are preceded by depictions of them as thugs, criminals, uneducable, and subhuman, we also believe this symbolic form of violence transpires in classrooms where educators hold dehumanizing assumptions about the history, culture, and language of Black youth. Against this lethal backdrop of disparaging circumstances (school closings, disinvestment of public schools, etc.) lurks the violence that stems from the curriculum many ELA teachers serve to Black youth.

In the subsequent sections, we highlight the symbolic violence that transpires from teaching traditional ELA curriculum. Then, we offer a theoretical framework that centers on Black literacies that secondary ELA teachers can use to disrupt the violence and curricula and pedagogical inequities against Black youth in schools. We conclude with a text set that is centered on Black literacies and texts that ELA teachers can use to revolutionize, (re)imagine, and sustain the humanity of Black youth.

Symbolic Violence in ELA Classrooms

Throughout society, people are discussing the physical deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Rekia Boyd, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones; however, it is quite difficult to assess the continuing assaults and the symbolic and spiritual deaths that unfold in classrooms through perpetuating whiteness and anti-Black racism. According to Susan Anne Cridland-Hughes and Lagarrett J. King, the traditional curriculum softly kills the spirit and humanity of Black youth. In agreement with the authors, Lamar L. Johnson and Nathaniel Bryan explain that Black youth are spiritually murdered in classrooms. That is, at times, educators can intentionally and unintentionally shoot metaphorical bullets that kill the spirit and humanity of Black students. Due to the tight grip white supremacy has on society, the authors explain three types of metaphorical bullets that are released at Black male professors in the academy; but, it can be extrapolated to Black



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people in general: the bullet of rejection, the bullet of silencing, and the bullet of disrespect. Unfortunately, these metaphorical bullets are shot in ELA classrooms and are piercing the hearts of Black youth. When we reject the multiple identities our Black students bring to the classroom, silence their voices by centering the lived experiences and stories of Europeans, and disrespect them by lowering our expectations and over-surveilling their bodies, bullets are shot at them. It is worth mentioning that we are explaining these metaphorical bullets not to make ELA teachers feel as though they have not taught Black students anything worth knowing; instead, we are hoping that a deep critical self-analysis of these bullets will give teachers pause and aid them in recognizing the unconscious ways they perpetuate violence in the ELA classroom.

To highlight, when Black students' prior knowledge, experiences, culture, literacies, and language are marginalized, ELA teachers are (un)intentionally enacting a curriculum of violence. For example, the traditional curriculum overtly and covertly attacks the beautiful, rich language, namely African American Language (AAL), Black students bring into ELA classrooms through the enforcement of stringent Eurocentric grammar rules—thus positioning society to believe mainstream American English is superior and is the only language that *should* be valued. AAL is a rule-governed and systematic language that many Black people

speak. According to John R. Rickford and Russell J. Rickford, AAL is deeply rooted in West African languages and English. It gives lyrical expressions to our music, flavors our soulful dishes, galvanizes our sermons, and enhances our comedic expressions. However, Black students have been socialized to view their language as “not good” and “incorrect,”

which Danny Martinez argues is an example of linguistic violence that is inflicted on Black speakers of AAL. Linguistic violence plays an essential role in the spirit murder of Black youth. It polices the language of students by forcing them to adopt the language of the oppressor while dishonoring the linguistic dexterity Black youth bring to classrooms. As such, ELA teachers need to understand the multiple ways Black students express themselves and show a sense of belonging, which are deeply rooted in their language and shapes the foundation for individual identity (Boutte); however, in many classrooms, Black youth are measured on their ability to *black out* their language and their ability to *erase* that component of their identity (Cridland-Hughes and King).

Indeed, symbolic violence and spirit murder are not only connected to oppressive language curricula and practices but also are in tandem with oppressive literacy curricula and practices that serve as violent acts to Black youth. Tandra O. Jackson and Gloria S. Boutte and Marcelle Haddix and Detra Price-Dennis posit most of children’s literature, young adolescent novels, and American literature that teachers select usually promote Westernized ideologies, values, and beliefs. Too often, texts that are selected for Black youth provide narrow and monolithic depictions of Black life and ways of existing and being. Without a doubt, these distorted images and antagonistic storylines about Black people are harmful to Black students. Furthermore, Jackson and Boutte explicate that white males are most likely to receive texts, novels, and curricula where their perspective is represented, whereas Black youth typically receive texts that send the message that they are inferior, subordinate, and unreal.

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In the wake of racial violence, teachers must acknowledge that there is no distance between Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Tamir Rice, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones and Black students who sit in our ELA classrooms. National organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Literacy Research Association (LRA) have made this clear by calling attention to the outcries of Black youth and calling on ELA teachers and literacy researchers to work against anti-Black racism that is inflicted on Black bodies (Literacy Research Association; “NCTE Statement”). These organizations have been adamant and intentional about centering students who experience broken legs and arms, dislocated backs and shoulders, cracked spines and ribs, and bullets to their heads and chests (Coates), which all stem from racist ideologies and perspectives reinforced in classrooms. Therefore, to empathize with Black students and their suffering, we argue that ELA classrooms must become revolutionary sites for racial justice by shedding light on Black lives and creating classrooms where Black youth are empowered through Black literacies and tools that uplift and support the humanity of Black people.

Critical Race English Education and Black Literacies

As educators, we can become complicit in the process of Black youths’ educational failure, “albeit often unintentionally or because we are unaware of the larger implications and influence of our actions and practices” (Boutte 1). Nevertheless, as educators, we need to understand the violence will not cease as long as the curriculum reinscribes and perpetuates oppression. Therefore, ELA teachers and literacy educators must begin to reimagine ELA classrooms as revolutionary sites that disrupt racial injustice while striving to transform the world and humanize the lives of Black youth. To humanize the lives of Black youth, the field of English education must start incorporating the multiple Black literacies and language Black students bring to classrooms. To deny Black youths’ literacies is to dismiss their humanity, which often transpires from this endemic phenomenon of anti-Blackness.

Thus, in this section, we argue in support of Black literacies. Black literacies run counter to the

Black suffering that takes place in ELA classrooms. Our conception of Black literacies is birthed from Lamar Johnson's conception of critical race English education (CREE). CREE "explicitly addresses issues of race, racism, whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-blackness within school and out-of-school spaces. It also seeks to dismantle dominant texts (i.e., canonical texts, art, and media texts) while also highlighting how language and literacy can be used as tools to uplift and transform the lives of people who are often on the margins in society and P-20 spaces" (Johnson). Not only does CREE work within this racialized context specifically to address white supremacy and anti-Blackness, but it also highlights Black literacies. Black literacies affirm the lives, spirit, language, and knowledge of Black people and culture. In addition, Black literacies are grounded in Black liberatory thought, which supports and empowers the emotional, psychological, and spiritual conditions of Black people throughout the Diaspora, and moves beyond traditional understanding of texts (Kirkland). It may include tattoos, poems, novellas, graphic novels, technology/social media sites, oral histories/storytelling, body movements/dance, music, and prose. This, however, is not an exhaustive list because Black youth and Black people are constantly creating new expressions of Black literacies.

To this end, Black literacies are situated in a radical love for Blackness. There is an urgency for ELA teachers and literacy educators to start "loving Blackness to death." In African American language, we say we "love something or someone to death" or as some Black adults say, we "love the hell out of something or someone"—to love someone to death and to love the hell out of someone is to have strong feelings and admiration for someone that one will love her or him unconditionally until one no longer exists in physical form and beyond physical death. With this in mind, we raise the following question: What does it mean to love Blackness to death and to love the hell out of Blackness in a time of racial turmoil? We charge the field of English education to love Blackness to death in a time where Black lives remain unimagined and unimaginable (Dumas and Nelson) and to celebrate Blackness as a dynamic and ever-changing onto-epistemological entity that supports the ingenuity, brilliance, and humanity of Black children, youth, and adults.

For this reason and more, if we loved Blackness to death, then, maybe the heavy tears that roll down the faces of Black families at the unjust killing of their close relatives and friends could be stopped but also could compel Black people to wonder, When are *we* going to get tired of tasting our own tears? Stated pointedly, Black pre-/inservice teachers, Black teacher educators, and other teachers of Color must acknowledge that it has to be us who are tired of tasting our heavy tears that stem from the hands of white supremacy. And, to white pre-/inservice teachers and teacher educators, no Black people can taste our own tears and continue to allow public schooling, public policing, and public governance continue to kill us. Therefore, it is going to take a collective effort from teachers, police officers, doctors, politicians, researchers, families, children, youth, and community members to eradicate Black tears and that can start with, in, and through the curriculum we teach and our pedagogical practices. In relation to the teaching of Black youth, the current moment reminds us of Stephen Dillon's warning: "the spirit of slavery has its own desires that exceeds our conscious control or thought. But for the demonic to be exercised, you must first know that you are possessed" (123). Such a love must work to acknowledge and defeat our capacity to be possessed.

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Loving Blackness to Death in ELA Classrooms

Using literature from Black radical tradition in the P-20 classroom can be violent to Eurocentric dominant schooling practices. As remarked by Cedric J. Robinson at the closing of his text, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, the Black radical tradition is often at odds with European thought and has to reimagine a collective sense of community to combat European state violence. This has been the project of European colonialism. When one thinks about one who can think and create, we buy into thinking Europeans are the

supreme thinkers. For example, we cite Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates as "canonic," supreme thinkers while rendering texts written by Black and African scholars as invisible. When one thinks about one who writes, we think European. For example, we think of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Sigmund Freud. When one thinks about one who has colonized the world, who controls the economic systems, and who has led racial mob violence against Black/African bodies, one thinks of the European.

Returning to Robinson's argument, one part of the solution to Eurocentric violence in classrooms and in the streets starts with collective action. And part of the collective action is a curriculum that theorizes the importance of and value of Black literacies and life. In many secondary ELA classrooms, teachers are required to teach texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Magna Carta. Therefore, if we truly want to center Black lives and literacies, we need to supplement our curriculum with texts that focus on Black struggle and liberation to teach in conjunction with Eurocentric texts. To illustrate, teaching Assata Shakur's biography serves three action points in ELA classrooms to counteract Eurocentric violence. In essence, this is an interdisciplinary piece helping teachers bring in literature from history, resistance movements, international relations, women's studies, and Black studies. First, it is a perennial American text about freedom and democracy. As a piece of protest literature, Assata's autobiography needs to be taught alongside the Declaration of Independence, the Magna Carta, and slave narratives to help students and teachers learn the difference and similarities of how European and people of African descent conceptualize freedom, democracy, and rights. Second, Assata's text can help ELA classrooms bring in current events such as the newly formed relationship between Cuba and the United States under the Obama administration. After decades of sanctions, Cuba/US relations have transitioned into a new frontier. However, this newly crafted relationship has placed Assata Shakur at the top of the FBI's Most Wanted List to be extradited back to the United States and tried for a murder she did not commit. Third, this particular text can be coupled with current hip-hop texts. For example, pair Assata's text with rapper and hip-hop activist

Jasiri X's song, "New Nat Turners." In the text, Jasiri X writes, "my sheros got a 2 million dollar bounty on her future." This line sheds light on the recent placement of Assata on the FBI's Most Wanted List. By infusing Assata's text within the curriculum, Black teachers and students are able to embody CREE, which connects the historical movements of Black liberation to the current movements of Black liberation.

What we have tried to do is elaborate on an example of how we use Black texts in our ELA classrooms to counteract Eurocentric violence often endured by Black students and teachers in schools manufactured out of Eurocentric histories. The 2016 murder of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; the 2016 murder of Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota; the 2015 murder of Walter Scott in Charleston, South Carolina; the 2015 Flint, Michigan, water poisoning; and the 2014 Ferguson uprising give us as Black educators pause to think about if we want to reimagine the Black body as worthy of humanization. The current revolution #BlackLivesMatter is undoubtedly a point of (re)imagination. The letters written between James Baldwin and Angela Y. Davis are a point of (re)imagination. And the poetry and science created by Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker are a point of (re)imagination. Figure 1 provides a text set² that educators can use to (re)imagine Blackness and as a way to strive to sustain the humanity of Black youth.

Conclusion

The curriculum of Black resistance in the classroom, one aimed at what Denise Taliaferro Baszile has called education for liberation, must duly note the movements to resist violent practices of education and simultaneously (re)inscribe practices that humanize our Black teachers and students. If we cease to do nothing, then our dutiful Black lives may continue being passable for death under the book, the ballot, and the bullet. What if our quest toward a better world free of the chains of police violence, economic deprivation, mass incarceration, and anti-Blackness inferiority complex starts with Black Diasporic literacy and Black literacies? What if our Haitian rebellion, our Denmark Vesey movement, and our Ferguson uprising are central

FIGURE 1. “Say It Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!”: Black Literacies Text Set**Possible Anchor Texts**

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel and Grau, 2015.

Davis, Angela Y. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Haymarket Books, 2016.

Young Adolescent Novels

Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*. Houghton Mifflin, 2014.

Flake, Sharon G. *The Skin I’m In*. First Jump at the Sun, 1998.

Graphic Novels

Johnson, Mat. *Incognito: A Graphic Mystery*. Vertigo, 2008.

McGruder, Aaron. *A Right to Be Hostile: The Boon-docks Treasury*. Three Rivers Press, 2003.

Children’s Literature

Giovanni, Nikki. *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat*. Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2008.

hooks, bell. *Happy to Be Nappy*. Hyperion, 1999.

Nonfiction

Bryan, Nathaniel. “There’s No ‘Victory in the Valley’: Moving beyond the Myth of Racial Reconciliation in Charleston.” *The Chronicle*, 22 June 2016, www.charlestonchronicle.net/109247/2152/there-s-no-victory-in-the-valley-moving-beyond-the-myth-of-racial-reconciliation-in-charleston.

Paris, Rae. “An Open Letter of Love to Black Students: #BlackLivesMatter.” *Black Space*. 15 Apr. 2016, <https://blackspaceblog.com/2014/12/08/an-open-letter-of-love-to-black-students-blacklivesmatter/>.

Movies

Dope. Directed by Rick Famuyiwa, Universal Studios, 2015.

Straight out of Compton. Directed by F. Gary Gray, Universal Pictures, 2015.

Art

Shakur, Afeni. *TUPAC 1971–1996 Resurrection*. Atria Books, 2003.

Von Drehle, David. *America, 2015: “What Has Changed. What Hasn’t.”* *Time Magazine*, vol. 185, no. 17, 11 May 2015, <http://time.com/magazine/us/3841445/may-11th-2015-vol-185-no-17-u-s/>.

Social Media Texts (Memes, Videos, and Websites)

“Black Lives Matter.” Facebook, 8 July 2016, www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatter/.

Smith, Danez. “Dinosaurs in the Hood.” YouTube, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJwiOTeKDOQ.

Poetry


Muntaqim, Jalil A. *We Are Our Own Liberators: Selected Prison Writings*. Arissa Media Group, 2010.

Shakur, Assata. “The Tradition.” *RCG*, 20 Aug. 2014, <https://redrevolutionart.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/the-tradition-by-assata-shakur/>.

Music

Flack, Roberta, and Donny Hathaway. “Be Real Black for Me.” *Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway*, Atlantic, 1972.

Shakur, Tupac. “Keep Ya Head Up.” *Greatest Hits*, Interscope, 1998.

to starting a new Black consciousness? And, what if our imagination as Black thinkers, teachers, and community members are death-defying acts of love that can reap a world anew? 

Notes

1. We as Black scholars chose to strategically capitalize Black, people of Color, and other racialized language to show love for Black people and people of Color who are often hurt by white supremacy. In addition, we have chosen to combat white supremacy in language by making the “w” on white lowercase. For more detailed description, see Cheryl E. Matias’s “White Skin, Black Friend: A Fanonian Application to Theorize Racial Fetish in Teacher Education” (*Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2016, pp. 221–36).

2. In the article, we define a text set as a collection of texts across multiple genres that are centered on a particular topic or theme.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The Skin I’m In by Sharon Flake is one of the texts suggested on the Black Literacies Text Set. Learn more about that text and others in the ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode, “Celebrating the NCTE African American Read-In.” Tune in for recommendations of both old and new titles by distinguished African American authors who write for teens. Featured books range from historical novels to contemporary explorations of African American life in both urban and suburban settings. <http://bit.ly/2cLcNB1>