

## Being needed but not wanted: Antiracism in English curriculum, practice, and culture

In *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, Calvin L. Warren tells us why “Black Lives Matter,” as a statement, carries with it a concealed terror. He writes: “‘Black Lives Matter’ is an important declaration, not just because it foregrounds the quest of unbearable brutality, but also because it . . . compels us to face the terrifying question, despite our desire to look away . . . *can blacks have life?* What would such life mean within an antiracist world?” (2018, p. 1). And so, to his query, here begins our special section situated within the context of English education, “Can Blacks Have Life?: Anti-Blackness in English Curriculum, Practice, and Culture. Within these pages, we ask educators to critically reflect on what it would mean to expose anti-Blackness in English teaching, practice and culture, and importantly, how teachers might work to explicitly humanize Black and Brown youth of Color. What would have to happen – and *change* – for us to realize this?

To recall, this question of change pervaded many conversations following summer 2020, when we, along with the rest of everybody, witnessed the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests. Black, Indigenous and non-Black people of Color and White progressives took to the streets by the masses, chanting – *demanding* – racial justice for the ongoing ruthless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless other Black women, Black children and Black men. Throughout the days and weeks of that summer, statues of Confederate racists fell to the ground. Local and city governments sought to defund their police departments. And educational institutions quickly declared antiracist action plans: public statements, training workshops, reading lists and reading circles. On social media, White allies posted videos confessing their White privilege; others posted personal commitments vowing to dismantle White supremacy. Friends, families and strangers looked around and at each other, and for split moments, some exhaled. Could this be it? Finally?

White supremacy operates through the manipulation of time. Using phrases to suggest liberation is too soon or whether it is moving too quickly suggests that if the oppressed wants change, it has to be requested and implemented on a timetable that soothes and amplifies the concerns of the oppressor. While we still wait for the coinciding beliefs and actions that Black lives have meaning, the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to ravage the Earth and has taken an (under)estimated 4 million of the Earth’s citizens away. Because of global anti-Blackness, a disproportionate amount of Black and Brown people have lost their lives or have been completely engulfed with personal and communal destruction this disease has caused. School buildings were shuttered, and if students did not disappear from the roster all together, they were herded into virtual learning, often revealing how resources that were considered scarce and unaffordable were all of a sudden, plentiful and accessible. For many people, the actions and events propelled by the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19 were examples of change – albeit performative, at times. They suggested that our world was making *progress*. As Black Civil Rights activist and leader, Davis (2020), said in an interview with *Channel 4 News*, “This moment holds possibilities for change we have never before experienced in this country.” And she was right: “possibilities for change” they were.

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But the notion of “possibilities” can be as hopeful as it can be deflating, and change can be an arbitrary concept with wide degrees of variances, and thus, impact. As antiracist, Black and non-Black educators of Color – Stephanie, who identifies as a Black woman and Rossina, who identifies as an Asian American woman – we know all too well that the change granted from protests and movements is often not likely the change we demanded and needed. Particularly in an anti-Black education system, change often materializes in the abstracts of statements condemning racism and in diversity and inclusion initiatives – more speaker events, more book clubs more workshops. Rarely, if ever, does change from the oppressor requires consistency with the following characteristics: interrogating White supremacy and Whiteness in pedagogical practices and value systems; challenging curricula that harm Black and Brown youth of Color; exposing racial trauma in classrooms; and/or honoring the literacies and full humanity of Black and Brown youth.

As co-editors of this special section, we understand that to enact impactful change, we must contextualize our visions and query within the permanent state of anti-Blackness in our world (Wilderson, 2020). That anti-Blackness is endemic suggests that the dehumanization of Black people, Black culture, Black language, Black literacies and Black existence is embedded in all spaces and at all times – in our social, cultural and political structures and institutions, including our schools – and it is sanctioned and justified by way of anti-Black racism, practices and policies (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Any possibility of educational change must, thus, be enacted in the here-and-now present (Ross, 2020) and must explicitly center Blackness (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). Similarly, these attempts at educational change must be examined with critique.

As Dumas (2016) asserts, “any incisive analyses of racial(ized) discourse and policy processes in education must grapple with cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness” (p. 12). In English education, this means that any rupture to anti-Blackness must therefore entail deep, critical excavation and interrogation of canonical curricula and teaching practices and values rooted in Eurocentric (Johnson, 2018; Lyiscott, 2017), White colonialism and White supremacy.

Indeed, interlocked with the authorization of anti-Blackness, is the unquestioned universality of Whiteness and White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). English education, in particular, is predicated on the normalization and the reproduction of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In English classrooms, White practices, values and identities inform curricular “standards” – for language, for literacy, for learning – and any detour from these conventions is deemed as a detour from what is normal and what is literate. Many teachers prioritize colorblind pedagogical approaches that, at once, acculturate students of color toward “racial innocuousness” (Liu *et al.*, 2019); rather than humanize Black and Brown youth as cultural and linguistic knowledge bearers (Baker-Bell, 2020a, 2020b; Baker-Bell *et al.*, 2017; Paris and Alim, 2017), teachers ascribe students with deficits who need to learn white conventions. From classroom management to code-switching to prescribed writing paradigms, teachers limit Black and Brown youth to discrete literacy skills, practices and behaviors; they gauge success and achievement by students’ proximity to Whiteness, and in so doing, they reproduce White supremacy in English education.

Our collaboration on this special section was and is, henceforth, a response to the ongoing superficial attempts at addressing anti-Blackness in our schools and classrooms. Importantly, this section was and is an effort motivated by our deep love for Black and Brown children and their brilliances (Love, 2019), and for teachers who are committed to dismantling anti-Blackness in their teaching practices. We – Stephanie and Rossina – are also close friends and colleagues whose conversations weave naturally in and out between

well-being check-ins and collaborations on seminars and writing projects. Coming together on this effort was and is a consequence of our friendship, respect and love for each other. In conceptualizing this special section, we knew immediately that we wanted to build on ideas we had been presenting at conferences; we knew that we would interrogate what English educational change would and *could* mean, pondering on Lyiscott's (2017) query, "We out'chea fightin' for Black lives to matter in dese streets, but do Black Lives Matter in classrooms?" (p. 47).

Framed by theories of anti-Blackness and the looming universality of Whiteness, this section is graced by the brilliant minds and hearts of scholars and educators who intentionally build on and add to scholarship that centers Blackness (Baker-Bell, 2020a, 2020b; Coles, 2020; Johnson, 2018; Jones, 2020; Lyiscott, 2017) in explicit and intentional ways, and who continuously grapple with the possibility and impossibility of demolishing anti-Blackness within the context of English education. We hope that by featuring their work and by centering the voices and perspectives of Black and Brown youth of Color and teachers, we can underscore the complexities of dismantling anti-Blackness in English education, but also show that it *can* and *does* happen. At the same time, we also caution against "quick fixes" and universalized solutions to fighting anti-Blackness, knowing that prescriptive practices, approaches and resolutions can and *do* reproduce harm in their one-size-fits-all confections (Baker-Bell, 2020a, 2020b). To this point, we call on educators who do this work to engage in ongoing critical introspection and reflexivity (Johnson, 2018; Madison, 2020; Milner, 2007) as they consider what change *could* look like in their classrooms – what it means to rupture anti-Blackness, center Black brilliances and honor the full humanity of Black and Brown youth of Color.

A purposeful call on anti-Blackness in English education articulates the permanent, ongoing presence of racism and White supremacy. Our aim is to feature scholarship that not only acknowledges this premise but the ways in which Black life can be sustained and nurtured. We purposely did not want to mirror a larger trend in antiracist English education scholarship: the conflation of anti-racism and anti-Blackness. As editors, we had to continuously ask: *What does it mean for you, as a white or a non-Black person of color, to grapple with anti-Blackness?*

It is important that we have articles that attend to the personal and political reflections of white teachers attempting to transform their practice for the liberation of Black and Brown youth. Yet, anti-Blackness is specifically concerned with the suffering of Black life – and the answers to understanding this phenomenon as Wilderson (2020) suggests, "can't be reconciled through the suffering of other people." Antiracism in schools has quickly become diluted into inspired checklists and succinct definitions of whether a person is racist or not. But what anti-Blackness requires is an acknowledgment of the ongoing struggle against the dual realities of simultaneous integration and exclusion of Black life. In other words, the presence of Black and Brown children help non-Black educators reflect on their theoretical stances, but yet the children themselves are discarded in the account to help prioritize others. So, when considering Black life within the confines of anti-Blackness, this special section must focus on sustaining and centering what is precious.

Our special section begins with hope and with the intentionality of centering Black girls and Black boys in English education. We introduce English educators to Alexis Morgan Young, who dreams with and alongside Black girls of the here and now in a place called, *Wonderland*. Specifically, in her conceptual paper, "Witnessing Wonderland: Research with Black Girls Imagining Freer Futures," Young frames her exploration of literature on Black girl freedom dreams around the ideas of temporality. Building on kihana miraya Ross's (2020) theorization and what to do with the "in the meantime, in between time" (p.12),

Young's work is a beautiful rethinking and reshaping of time. When we read her essay, we were especially moved by the deep love that she expressed on the page for Black girls. We understood right then and there that if any change were possible in the English classroom, that it would have to be propelled by love for and commitment to Black girls and to Black and Brown youth more generally. We understood, too, the urgency for a liberated future, one where educators take part in giving youth "opportunities to prepare themselves to live in the worlds they desire." Indeed, as Young so poignantly poses: "If the revolution comes and the current racial order is destroyed, would we be ready?"

Indeed, ready we must be. Black youth have been ready to show the world what they know long before schools were built and curricula were constructed. In response to this urgency, we present two studies by scholars who continuously commit their time and love to working directly with Black youth. In both studies, the authors gifted us with beautiful portraits of Black youth living and visions of their futures. Specifically, in "Critique Toward a Pedagogy of Black Livingness: Black Students' Creative Multimodal Renderings of Resistance to Anti-Blackness," Autumn Griffin and Jennifer Dandridge Turner brilliantly illuminate the ways that Black elementary and middle school students author a more racially just society and envision self-determined, joyful futures through multimodal renderings. Perhaps what is especially inspiring about their study is the ways that Griffin and Turner show us what *could* and *does* happen when educators cultivate creative venues for Black and Brown youth of Color to express their views of the world and of their lives. Moreover, in reminding us of the power of multimodal rendering, they leave us with a thoughtful theorization of a Black Livingness Pedagogy that centers care for Black youth, lending educators with a way of thinking, and of working with and learning from Black youth.

Where Griffin and Turner invite us into the creative spaces of Black youth imaginings, Justin Coles theorize the role and flexible nature of Black English outer spaces, and define the multi-ethnic nature of Blackness. In their youth-centered study, "Blackness as Intervention: Black English Outer Spaces and the Rupturing of Antiracism and/in English Education," Coles and Soto propose that affirmations of Blackness sharpened participants' critical literacies in Black English outer spaces as a transformative intervention to anti-Black English education spaces. They contend that participants' unique and varied revelations of Blackness as Vitality, Blackness as Cognizance and Blackness as Expansive Community, can and do serve to withstand, confront, and transcend encounters with anti-Blackness in English curricula. The authors' study serves as a model for how to engage Black youth in disrupting anti-Black English education spaces and provides a foundation for future research efforts of Black English outer spaces as they relate to English education. At the heart of this study is the ingenious idea that Black liberatory spaces must seep beyond the physical conventions of English education, that in a permanent state of anti-Blackness, educators must expand past existing variables and rubrics if we are to begin to rupture anti-Blackness, if we are to move toward change. Above all, Black youth are at the center of these Black English outer spaces, and they are the brilliant minds behind the making of such spaces.

Both studies show us the beautiful possibilities of centering Blackness in our curriculum. We see that when teachers and educators position Black youth as makers of knowledge and as authors of their own selves and narratives, they, themselves reshape the English classroom as liberatory teaching and learning spaces. But to do so in the "here and now" must also contend with the glaring challenges of systemic and structural anti-Blackness and Whiteness in English education. In the next two articles, the authors ponder on the question inspired by Warren: Can blacks have life in the English classroom?

Stephanie R. Toliver and Heidi Hadley remind us of the difficulties in dismantling structural whiteness and the violence and harm that come with it. In “Rhetorically Speaking: On White Preservice Teachers’ Failure to Imagine an Anti-Racist English Education,” the authors identify how white preservice teachers’ inability to imagine an equitable space for Black and Brown children contributes to the ubiquity of whiteness in English education. Using abolitionist teaching as a guide, they use reflexive thematic analysis to examine the rhetorical moves their preservice teachers made to defer responsibility for anti-racist teaching. In their analysis, Toliver and Hadley discuss three themes: preservice teachers’ failure to imagine Black and Brown humanity, failure to imagine a connection between theory and practice, and failure to imagine curriculum and schooling beyond Whiteness. Although these themes are derived from preservice teachers’ responses, the scholars contend that they represent much wider implications, and in so doing, mirror how the general field of English education fails to imagine Black and Brown life. As a consequence, Toliver and Hadley suggest that teacher educators, teachers and English education programs work together to assist their faculty and students in activating their imaginations in the pursuit of anti-racist, abolitionist teaching.

Toliver and Hadley’s work underlines the deeply embedded onto-epistemological underpinnings of Whiteness, White supremacy and anti-Blackness in English teaching and practice. They remind us of the structural challenges that exist in any efforts to dismantle and/or fracture anti-Blackness, thus highlighting the need for educators to push beyond individual teaching practices and to interrogate the multiple systems in place that perpetuate anti-Blackness in English curricula.

As English educators work to dismantle systems of anti-Blackness and White supremacy, we are conjunctionally tasked with the day-to-day teaching. Indeed, as [Sealey-Ruiz \(2016\)](#) reminds us, English and literacy educators must also do whatever possible to use the space of our classrooms to interrogate and interrupt the violence that Black girls and Black youth endure. As educators, we have to believe that teachers can enact change – no matter how localized and ephemeral that change may be. In the next and final article of our section, Young, Butler, Strong and Turner stress on the importance of doing this work within the specifics of the English curricula. Specifically, theirs is a response to [Ladson-Billings \(2009\)](#) call to teachers to create curriculum that reflect, illuminate and elevate the brilliant ways that Black and Brown youth know and learn. In their conceptual paper, “Once Upon an AntiBlack Time: Unpacking the Counter Fairy Tales Framework to Engage Black Girls in Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction,” Young, Butler, Strong and Turner argue that culturally responsive approaches to literacy instruction are not only necessary to celebrate Black girl literacies, but are also necessary to expose, challenge and disrupt anti-Blackness in English education. Their paper expands upon the original conceptualization of Counter Fairytales Tales (CFT) ([Young, Foster, and Hines, 2018](#)) by further explicating the framework and providing recommendations to inform culturally responsive literacy practices. They ask: how can Counter Fairy Tales serve as a model of culturally responsive literacy instruction to help illuminate Black girls’ brilliances? How might it help place value on Black girls’ ways of knowing and given primacy to their voice and unique experiences through culturally responsive literacy instruction? In line with works like ([Sealey-Ruiz, 2016](#); [Winn, 2011](#)) they argue that a literary presence must be established, an environment in which Black girls can share their voices and visions as they explore themselves through writing.

Altogether, the articles that we feature in this special section on anti-Blackness in English education underscore the importance of centering Blackness and of having teachers who *see* and *recognize* Black and Brown youths’ literacy brilliances. We encourage English



educators to read these studies and papers with an awareness of their social and racial positionalities as educators – who they are in relation to structural anti-Blackness and racism (Liu *et al.*, 2021), and importantly, who they are in relation to their students. We contend that only by understanding each of our own positionalities can we begin to meaningfully and impactfully partake in the dismantling of anti-Blackness in English teaching and curriculum.

**Stephanie P. Jones**

*Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, USA, and*

**Rossina Zamora Liu**

*University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA*

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