

Where Do We Go from Here? Toward a Critical Race English Education

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In this article, I propose Critical Race English Education (CREE) as a theoretical and pedagogical construct that tackles white supremacy and anti-black racism within English education and ELA classrooms. I employ autoethnography and counterstorytelling as methods that center my multiple identities and lived realities as I document my racialized and gendered experiences in relation to my journey to Ferguson, MO and my experiences as a secondary ELA teacher. The research questions guiding this study are the following: (1) As a Black male English educator and language and literacy scholar, how am I implicated in the struggle for racial justice and what does it mean for me to teach literacy in our present-day justice movement?; (2) How are Black lives mattering in ELA classrooms?; and, (3) How are we using Black youth life histories and experiences to inform our mindset, curriculum, and pedagogical practices in the classroom? This article explicates findings from three interconnected stories that work to show how CREE can be operationalized to better understand the #BlackLivesMatter movement in its historical and contemporary dimensions. The data analyzed stem from my autobiographical narratives, observations, social media artifacts, and images. I aim to expand English education to be more synergistically attuned to racial justice issues dealing with police brutality, the mass incarceration of Black people, and legacies of grassroots activism. This analysis suggests implications that aim to move the pedagogical practices around the intersections of anti-blackness and literacy from the margins to the center of discussion and praxis in ELA contexts.

Prelude: The Other Trayvon

On February 26, 2012, many people were numbed or in pain following the murder of Trayvon Martin. It's still hard to believe that Trayvon's life was taken away from him in just a matter of seconds by the hands of a man who viewed him as not fully human and by a society that saw his black hoodie and his Black skin as threats. Trayvon's murder happened two days after my 23rd birthday. My soul remembers (Greene, Boutte, & Hightower, 2018).

Trayvon Martin—a name that reminds me of the state-sanctioned racial violence that physically and symbolically abuses and kills the bodies and spirits of Black children and youth.

Trayvon Martin—a name that reminds me that Black Lives do Matter, in this particular case, even in English language arts classrooms and language and literacy education.

Trayvon Martin's unjust and horrendous death—as well as the taking of other Black, Brown, and transgender lives—influences my journey and shapes who I am as a critical race English educator. That Monday morning in 2012, during my first year of teaching, a timid 15-year-old Black male student, whose name coincidentally was also Trayvon, raised a question to me. He asked, “Mr. J., have you heard about the shooting of Trayvon Martin?” With a look of confusion, I replied, “No, I haven't.” Trayvon proceeded to explain the story of Trayvon Martin's murder and how the neighborhood watchman racially profiled and physically abused him.

As Trayvon continued to share the story about Trayvon Martin, a few students gave head nods of affirmation while echoes of “yeah, I heard about that” permeated the room. Aaron, a Black male teenager, yelled, “Why did that watchman do him like that?” While I facilitated the critical conversation, I simultaneously searched the web for a news media clip that would help explain the racial incident. In a space of contestation, I witnessed my 14- and 15-year-old Black students wrestling with the misperceptions, stereotypes, and racial violence that are inflicted upon Black lives. The students and I watched a CNN news report that attempted to explain the events that took place between Martin and the neighborhood watchman. After the clip ended, I asked my students the following questions: *What can we do to speak back and to speak up about the police brutality that transpires in communities? Should a person be able to defend themselves if they are in danger of being hurt or even killed? Do you feel that people of different races are treated equally in today's society? Give an example of a time when you have experienced or seen unequal treatment. What is your definition of justice?*

My soul remembers.

Introduction

The above story sheds light on how Black youth are thinking about racial violence, on the relationship between how Black bodies are positioned in and out of school, and on the implications for English education. I didn't hear about the killing of Trayvon Martin from watching the news or through social media—my students informed me. If I hadn't genuinely listened to their words, I could have perpetuated further violence upon them by not incorporating critical questions and activities centered on their experience with racial injustice. This particular critical incident helped me to realize how imperative it is for educators to pay attention to the events unfolding in the world and how they affect the lives and learning of Black youth.

This story sheds light on the racial violence against Black youth that continues to sweep across the country. The physical violence that unfolds in out-of-school spaces (e.g., churches, neighborhoods, parks, playgrounds, gas stations, etc.) is connected to the symbolic violence (defined later) that is constitutive of PreK–20 classrooms and institutions (e.g., high suspension and expulsion rates for Black youth, overrepresentation in special education courses, underrepresentation in

gifted education courses, and the hidden curriculum). Simply put, ELA classrooms, language and literacy studies, and English education are not exempted from the racial violence that Black youth encounter.

In this article, I extend the #BlackLivesMatter movement to language and literacy studies, ELA classrooms, and English education because we, as educators, cannot allow these pressing issues to go unaddressed. English education and ELA classrooms are dominated by eurocentric ideologies which are acts of violence that constantly remind Black children and youth that their language, literacies, culture, race, ethnicity, and humanity don't matter. Therefore, I take a close look at the ways in which educators can counteract the racial violence that erupts in ELA classrooms and in language and literacy studies through humanizing curricula and pedagogical practices that reject anti-black racism. The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. As a Black male English educator and language and literacy scholar, how am I implicated in the struggle for racial justice and what does it mean for me to teach literacy in our present-day justice movement?
2. How are Black lives mattering in ELA classrooms?
3. How are we using Black youth life histories and experiences to inform our mindset, curriculum, and pedagogical practices in the classroom?

From these research inquiries, I trace how the unjust killing of Michael Brown, my journey to Ferguson, and my experiences as a Black male, as a former secondary ELA teacher, and now as a teacher educator shape my understanding of how we, as a field, are interconnected with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, anti-blackness, and the violence that unfolds in communities. I aim to show how critical race English education (CREE) can be operationalized to better understand the #BlackLivesMatter movement in its historical and contemporary dimensions and expand English education and ELA classrooms to be more attuned to racial justice issues dealing with police brutality, the mass incarceration of Black people, and legacies of grassroots activism. I propose CREE as a conceptual framework that informs research and pedagogy, including the methods by which I interpret data and the methods of designing and facilitating an ELA class. CREE is not only connected to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but in this particular study, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was a data reference point for analysis. I utilized CREE as an analytical and pedagogical tool to help me understand and explicate the #BlackLivesMatter movement in relation to education, literacy, curriculum, and pedagogy.

It would be disingenuous of me to discuss #BlackLivesMatter without paying homage to the contributions, labor, and love of three Black queer women who created the movement—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors. They created #BlackLivesMatter after George Zimmerman was acquitted for murdering 17-year-old, unarmed Black male teenager Trayvon Martin (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>). #BlackLivesMatter is an action-oriented movement that unveils the operation of white supremacy and works to dismantle a system that has a deep

history of state-sanctioned violence (Dumas & ross, 2016; Rogers, 2018). The recent killings of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Renisha McBride, Rekia Boyd, Stephon Clark, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones have sparked a much-needed conversation between national educational organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the Literacy Research Association, and the broader field of English education. Scholar-activists within these organizations are leading the way and, through their position statements, have challenged the field of English education and language and literacy studies to (re)consider how they are implicated in the tragic killings of Black people. In making this statement, NCTE Black Caucus urges the field of English education to (re)imagine ELA curriculum as a revolutionized space that actively works against hegemonic language and literacy practices that further oppress and wreak violence against the bodies of Black students in classrooms. Building upon this argument, the Literacy Research Association states, “Children and youth in our schools today are living in a time of heightened racial violence, and these are the contexts in which literacy research examines issues that affect literacy learning and achievement” (Literacy Research Association, 2016).

In the following sections, I employ autoethnography to analyze my journey to Ferguson, Missouri, after the unjust killing of Michael Brown in light of the wider movement and social media response. Drawing from my personal experiences, observations, interviews, autobiographical narratives, social media artifacts, and images, I examine how literacy researchers, English educators, and ELA teachers can learn from the #BlackLivesMatter activism in ways that can inform research and practice. In doing this, I aim to move critical conversations and the pedagogical practices around the intersections of anti-blackness, violence, language, literacy, and education from the margins to the center of discussion and praxis in ELA contexts.

Theoretical Frameworks: Conceptualizing Critical Race English Education

I now turn to the theoretical underpinnings of CREE: critical race theory (CRT), Black critical theory (BlackCrit), and critical literacy frameworks. It is worth mentioning that I’m not proposing CREE as a replacement for CRT or BlackCrit; instead, as I explore in the coming section, CREE should be viewed as a member of the critical race family. I then turn to the literacy lineages of CREE, discussing the historical contributions of Black women language and literacy scholars and critical orientations to literacy as a social practice and in English education specifically.

CRT and BlackCrit

Critical race theory informs my research and teaching because, contrary to post-racial discourses, race *still* matters and racism is *still* alive and well. Decades ago, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the field of education. The authors argued that race was undertheorized in education; therefore, CRT would be an analytic tool to explicate race, racism, and white supremacy, and how these

constructs contribute to the oppression of minoritized groups. In doing so, they also utilized CRT to examine curriculum, instruction, assessment, policy, and school funding (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Due to minoritized groups' personal encounters with racial oppression, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) emphasize that a key component of CRT is the centralization of the voices and lived experiences of people of Color. This crucial dimension gives rise to the voices that are often unheard throughout US schools by allowing marginalized people to speak their pain and to tell their racialized and gendered stories.

Extending the conversation, Dumas and ross (2016) argue that CRT fails to explicitly address "the Black experience" and the racial oppression of Black people. That is, CRT does not adequately address anti-black racism. BlackCrit is a response to CRT and other "crits"—specifically, LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit, which have all developed as attempts to better identify and respond specifically to the racial oppression of Latinx, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous groups (Brayboy, 2005; Chang, 1993; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997). Building on the tenets of CRT, Dumas and ross (2016) propose BlackCrit as a theory to better understand "the Black experience" and how anti-black racism is located in laws, policies, and the everyday lives of Black people.

BlackCrit in education can assist educators in understanding how social structures, policies, and practices are influenced by anti-blackness. Jeffries (2014) states that anti-blackness "is not merely about hating or penalizing Black people. It is about the debasement of Black humanity, utter indifference to Black suffering, and the denial of Black people's right to exist" (p. 1). Moreover, this anti-black violence derives from anti-black policies and practices, which continue the pain and suffering of Black children and youth in schools. Although CRT and BlackCrit are used in higher educational spaces and research (see Baszile, 2006; Bell, 1992; Stovall, 2015), CRT and BlackCrit as theoretical and action-oriented frameworks to understand race and anti-black racism are underutilized in PreK–12 contexts.

Contributions of Black Women, Critical English Education, and Literacy Studies

There is a historical lineage of scholars who have called for racial justice work within ELA contexts. The work of CREE builds on the foundational contributions and stands on the shoulders of Black women language and literacy scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Arnetha Ball, and June Jordan, to name a few. Black women have always been at the forefront of many justice-oriented movements (e.g., slave uprisings, women's suffrage, the Black Arts Movement, the Black Freedom Movement, women's rights, the Civil Rights Movement, and LGBTQ movements). Historically and contemporarily, Black women continue to carry the torch of justice-oriented work. In a similar vein, I believe the social projects and epistemologies of Black women intellectuals provide robust frameworks for helping literacy studies understand the interconnection between language, race, identity, power, and pedagogy.

For example, Smitherman's (1979, 1995) body of work has historicized Black language and literacies in relation to the Black Arts Movement and the Black

Freedom Movement. Black movements have shaped Black peoples' beliefs and imagination, and have "fundamentally reimagined and re-landscaped Black writing and reading" (Kynard, 2013, p. 127). Smitherman's work challenges past and existing theories that demonize Black youths' language and literacy practices while privileging white mainstream ways of speaking, reading, and writing. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Smitherman (1979) understood that the ELA classroom had been engaging in fraudulent schemes against Black youths' linguistic repertoires. Smitherman (1995) asserts that "the game plan has always been linguistic and cultural absorption of the Other into the dominant culture, and indoctrination of the outsiders into the existing value system (e.g., Sledd 1972), to remake those on the margins in the image of the patriarch" (p. 25). Her research demonstrated that through the ELA curriculum, schools reinforced racial and linguistic subjugation by protecting white norms and values.

Since then, language and literacy educators, composition studies scholars, and ELA teachers have been building on and adding to the conversation (see Baker-Bell, 2017; Kinloch, 2005; Kynard, 2013). This intergenerational dialogue is urgent, especially in a world that strives to erase the identities of Black girls and women (Butler, 2017). For example, Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner (1997) theorize the interconnection between literacies, identity, and power through research on the preparation of teachers to work with youth who come from racially and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Ball and Lardner (1997) argue that teachers' uncritical and unconscious knowledge and attitudes about Black language affect Black youths' learning experiences in writing classrooms. Given the racial and linguistic differences in language-use patterns and styles, many classroom teachers' negative attitudes toward Black language develop from their lack of linguistic knowledge and utilization of narrow pedagogical techniques for teaching language skills (Ball & Lardner, 1997). Ball calls for writing teachers, literacy researchers, and ELA teachers to envision literacy and writing classrooms as transformative spaces that move toward more inclusive pedagogies that better support and sustain the oral and written literacies of Black youth.

The research of Geneva Smitherman and Arnetha Ball resonates with Caribbean poet, educator, and scholar June Jordan's 1982 keynote address to the National Council of Teachers of English, in which she queried, "What to do? What to do? . . . English education acts as a gatekeeper . . . closes down opportunities . . . narrows rather than opens possibilities of social meaning and social action" (Stuckey, 1990, p. 97)). In a time of racial chaos, when Black people are losing their lives at higher rates than any other racial and ethnic group as a result of state-sanctioned violence, white supremacy, and anti-black racism, what is English education to do? Where do we go from here? Decades later, these questions continue to linger.

As a counterhegemonic tool, Morrell (2005) proposes that the field increase its emphasis on critical English education in order to be "explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations" (p. 313). Critical English education is intentional about the role social context plays in students' meaning-making practices. It also provides youth

with the knowledge base to deconstruct canonical literature and popular culture texts such as media, art, and film, “while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice” (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). Critical English education welcomes multiple languages, literacies, and modalities that are reflective of societal changes.

In conjunction with critical English education, I draw upon literacies studies scholars who are attentive to issues of race and identity (e.g., Kynard, 2013; Haddix, 2015). These frameworks view literacy as a political act that reflects one’s racial, social, cultural, and geographical context. Furthermore, in contrast to prevalent skills-based approaches, these frameworks treat literacy as “something that people do, rather than something that they have or do not have” (Kynard, 2013, p. 32). Literacy studies has helped me to gain a better sense of how Black students have fought to be seen, heard, and humanized. I specifically draw upon critical orientations to literacy that refer to “the process of reading texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships and contexts” (Boutte, 2015, p. 79). An essential element of critical literacy is Freire’s (1970) notion that literacy is not only about reading the word but also about reading the world—societal events are texts that must be read, interrogated, and interrupted. Scholars such as Haddix (2015), Kirkland (2013), Paris (2010), and Sealey-Ruiz (2016) are all working at the intersections of English education and literacy studies, and have called for research and pedagogy to honor the literacies of Black youth and work to dismantle oppression.

CREE

These historical legacies and the continued state of racial violence have led me to propose CREE as a means of (re)imagining English education. CREE is a theory and pedagogy that:

- Explicitly addresses issues of violence, race, whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-black racism within school and out-of-school spaces.
- Explores the intimate history and the current relationship between literacy, language, race, and education by expanding the concept of literacies to include activist contexts and social movements.
- 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 the lives of people who are often on the margins in society and PreK–20 spaces.
- Builds on the Black literacies that Black youth bring to classrooms. Black literacies affirm the lives, spirit, language, and knowledge of Black people and Black 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 African Diaspora (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2016). Further, Black literacies move beyond the traditional understanding of texts (Kirkland, 2013) and may

include tattoos, poems, novellas, graphic novels, technology/social media sites, oral histories/storytelling, body movements/dance, music, and prose. This particular component of CREE counters anti-blackness by showcasing an *unapologetic, unashamed, and unconditional* love for Blackness and for Black lives.

CREE's contribution is its unwavering focus on the ways in which anti-blackness and violence, historically and currently, permeate ELA classrooms, and are deeply embedded within curriculum, standards, and routine pedagogies. Love (2017) explains that when Black youth are taught from a curriculum that stifles their voice and experiences, symbolically, it kills their humanity. Love explains how this form of symbolic violence leads to spirit-murder. Spirit-murder is the psychological and emotional death Black youth experience due to living in a world that embraces anti-black racism. ELA teachers and literacy educators must understand that choosing eurocentric texts that omit the lived realities of Black people or misrepresent the multiple ways of being Black leads to anti-blackness and the devaluation of Black life. Similarly, racial violence also occurs in *who* and *what* educators include (or do not include) in classrooms. Educators have to consider the countless Black students who experience racial fatigue and spirit-murdering from sitting in classrooms where Black students are typically invisible (e.g., in curriculum and pedagogy) yet hypervisible (e.g., in suspension, expulsion, and overrepresentation in special education classes), as well as begin to consider instructional practices that actively stand against the physical and symbolic violence perpetrated against Black bodies.

CREE is not only connected to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and other movements can inform and be viewed through CREE, such as slave uprisings, the Black Arts Movement, the Black Freedom Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Panther movement. Historically, literacy and Black protest movements have gone hand-in-hand. The social movements of Black youths' protests and resistance are also examples of literacies, from chants and phrases that were created to speak back to and against the debasement of Black humanity, to digital technologies that foster affinity spaces and collective actions for change.

#BlackLivesMatter in English Education and ELA Classrooms

Racism is etched within ELA classrooms and explicitly and implicitly influences the academic and social experiences of Black children and youth. As such, in order to disrupt racism, the structures, policies, and procedures that uphold racism must be named and unveiled. Teaching about white supremacy, whiteness, and anti-blackness is not for the faint of heart. It takes a deep level of critical consciousness and awareness of social and racial injustices against oppressed communities. Educators' hearts and minds have to change as well. This requires teachers who aren't afraid to resist the school-sanctioned language, literacy, and writing curriculum. ELA teachers committed to this vision should engage youth in humanizing racial dialogue (Matias, 2016).

Shipp (2017), for example, argues that if ELA classrooms revolutionize the traditional literary canon, then, essentially, we are revolutionizing the English

classroom. Therefore, “Let us shift from focusing exclusively on required texts to equally acknowledging the urgent need for consciousness and activism from our students” (Shipp, 2017, p. 39). Shipp engages in an autobiographical narrative of her experiences teaching high school English in the wake of racial violence and injustices. The author demonstrates how she infuses Black music and Black artists (e.g., Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé) into her curriculum, not only as a means for teaching ELA skills such as literary devices, figurative language, and literary analysis, but also to engage youth in critical discussions pertaining to the United States’s past and current-day issues with racial inequities. In addition, Shipp also incorporates present-day cultural movements like #BlackLivesMatter, Black Is Beautiful, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackExcellence into her English classroom, as well as Black contemporary authors, artists, poets, orators, and activists invoking powerful symbols and messages pertaining to Blackness, language, culture, and humanity.

Muhammad, Chisholm, and Starks (2017) examined the textual, communal, and sociopolitical partnerships of kinship writing as Black youth composed protest poetry. As they note, “kinship writing carries significance in the Black literary community as the history of Black education has been interlaced with ideals of social learning, community, family, and kinship” (Muhammad, Chisholm, & Starks, 2017, p. 347). Through a four-week summer writing program, the authors engaged 15 Black youth in sociopolitical writing workshops that centered on anti-blackness, Blackness, Black love, and solidarity. Their research demonstrates what it looks like to create critical writing pedagogies for youth by incorporating texts from the Black protest movements and from the past to our current historical insurgence known as the #BlackLivesMatter movement. By critically reading and engaging with Black youths’ kinship poems, Muhammad, Chisholm, and Starks found that the Black youth wrote across various topics that affect Black people and communities (e.g., gun violence and police brutality, the distorted depictions of Black lives, the conceptions of Black beauty, and the importance of revolutionary love and freedom). The authors call for English education classrooms to move from a narrow, linear approach to one that educates Black youth on how to use their words and “pens” as epistemic weapons to speak back/against racial oppression and marginalization.

In addition, my colleagues and I have conducted several conceptual studies pertaining to the theoretical and pedagogical conceptualizations of CREE (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017; Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017). The current study is an empirical example of how the literacy practices, events, and artifacts of the #BlackLivesMatter movement help ground and specify the construct of CREE and how CREE contributes to existing research directed toward equity in language and literacy studies and English education.

Research Methodology: Autoethnography and Counterstorytelling

This article is a counterstory that seeks to disrupt positivistic orientations to language and literacy research that privilege scientifically based reading methods

and methodologies and align with race-neutral theories, frameworks, and methodologies (see Paris & Winn, 2014). Taking a positivistic paradigmatic approach to research often objectifies communities of Color; perpetuates class stratification; continues the discriminatory treatment of people who speak other languages than white mainstream English; and silences the experiences of LGBTQ communities. There is a long history of scholarship from a range of paradigms that has pushed against positivistic approaches to qualitative research. For example, Black feminist epistemologies (see Baker-Bell, 2017; Butler, 2017), CRT (see Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), LatCrit (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997), and critical Indigenous methodologies (Tuck & Yang, 2014)—just to name a few—take a stance against discriminatory and dehumanizing research methods and methodologies. This study builds on traditions that challenge notions of research neutrality and “objectivity.” My theoretical grounding in CREE necessitated that I reconceptualize how I make sense of the research process, methodology, methods, and data analysis to be more humanizing. Paris (2010) defines humanizing research as “a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of care and dignity for both researchers and participants” (p. 141). In this light, CREE challenged the ways I participated and engaged in my research design, leading me to ask questions such as “What counts as theory? What counts as research? What counts as data? And what counts as analytical methods?” (Johnson, Gibbs Grey, & Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 5).

To consider the roles that anti-blackness, violence, and literacy play in ELA spaces and within communities in out-of-school contexts, I used CREE as a theoretical lens that helped me to share and analyze my racialized stories, and that worked hand-in-hand with methods such as autoethnography and counterstorytelling. For this qualitative study, I leaned on my personal racialized and gendered memories, autobiographical narratives, journal writings, social media interactions, pictures, and conversations with colleagues, family, and friends to help me to *tell, analyze, and theorize* my stories (Baker-Bell, 2017). Haddix (2015) argues that Black children’s, youths’, and women’s stories matter and that Black peoples’ stories illustrate how we are producers and holders of knowledge. I have selected stories from my journey to Ferguson, Missouri, and a specific teaching moment from my experience teaching secondary ELA to share in this article in order to analyze activist out-of-school literacies and moments where CREE might be operationalized in the classroom. The selected stories illuminate how racial violence is connected to language and literacy studies and English education while simultaneously showcasing humanizing and critical approaches to teaching ELA and conducting literacy research.

Utilizing CREE as a theoretical overlay to analyze my stories required me to ask various overarching questions that specifically pertained to the data: *In my stories as a language and literacy scholar or as an ELA teacher, whose identities are included and reflected in ELA curricula and pedagogies, and how are our curricula and pedagogies inclusive of Black youth? How is literacy being used in our current justice-oriented movements? Through a CREE-informed lens, what types of literacy modalities are being used to reposition what counts as literacy and to speak*

back to anti-blackness and dehumanization? What language and literacy practices have evolved in our current justice-oriented moments (i.e., #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName) and how do these current literacy practices connect to language and literacy practices from the justice-oriented movements of the past? These types of questions were used to interrogate and interpret my racialized stories, and served as entry points to begin to consider the connections between self, literacy, race, and racism. Layering these questions over my stories allowed me to reflect on my teaching experiences, reformulate how I view the research process, and reimagine how I center the humanity of Black youth and Black people in the classroom.

It is noteworthy to mention that many of my stories stem from my experiences visiting Ferguson, Missouri, during the 2014 Ferguson Uprising. While visiting Ferguson, I was well aware that I had entered a community that was not immediately my own. Before I delve into the (re)telling of my stories, I have to recognize the tension of entering that space as a Black male but also as a Black male researcher who comes with certain privileges. Oftentimes, researchers enter marginalized communities without examining their positionalities, multiple identities, biases, and ideologies. In my case, I aim to make sure that I'm not exploiting or misrepresenting the stories that shaped me while in Ferguson.

In this journey, my positionality was also in many ways hypervisible. As a Black male, how my body is perceived by white communities mattered in that exact moment. Visiting the community of Ferguson underscored to me how the personal becomes political and the political becomes personal. While narrating this memory, I articulate how this particular experience not only affected me as a Black male and as a Black son but also as a Black English educator. I employ autoethnography and counterstorytelling as methods that center my multiple identities and lived realities as I document my racialized and gendered experiences in relation to my journey.

Autoethnography

Brooms and Brice (2017) state that autoethnography foregrounds “writing from the ‘I’ perspective . . . to write about our own choices, decisions, and experiences in ways that traditional methodological approaches do not allow” (p.148). Drawing upon a reflexive autoethnographic account enables me to view my personal experience as a larger cultural experience—“a convergence of autobiography, narrative, and ethnography” (Martin, 2014, p. 240). As I have argued (Johnson, 2017), however, “autoethnographic work does not necessarily center racism, whiteness, and white supremacist patriarchy” (p. 483). I have sought to bridge this gap by juxtaposing autoethnography with CREE. Qualitative researchers delineate different types of autoethnographies, including “confessional (Ellis, 2004), evocative (Ellis, 1997), and analytical (Atkinson, 2006)” (Martin, 2014, p. 240). For this study, I utilize an analytical autoethnographic method.

Analytical autoethnographies interweave personal narratives into a theoretical depiction of a particular phenomenon (Baszile, 2006). Engaging in a humanizing ethnographic study of my(selves) in relation to my shared experiences with other Black people provided me with the language to name and analyze broader phenomena in ELA education. I believe it is worth situating the analytical autoethnographic

approach within a Black literary legacy where autobiography has been used to expose white supremacist patriarchy while asserting one's full humanity. In particular, I am reminded of the Black literary legacy of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia Cooper, Malcolm X, Audre Lorde—Black literary scholars, educators, orators, and writers who shared and wrote their stories into existence by discussing ways for Black people and society at large to understand the nuances of oppression, white supremacy, marginalization, literacy, education, and power (see Grant et al., 2016; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Building upon the autobiographies of Black literary scholars provided me with the knowledge to utilize writing as a tool to heal myself and to write myself free (Baker-Bell, 2017). In short, writing about my experiences through autoethnographic and autobiographical accounts has helped me to reflect on several questions: *Who am I? As a Black male English educator and language and literacy scholar, how am I implicated in the struggle for racial justice and what does it mean for me to teach literacy in our present-day justice movement?* To answer these questions, I wedded autoethnography and counterstorytelling as methods to help me collect, share, and write my stories.

Counterstorytelling

Dominant narratives—or stories—often sustain whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-blackness by privileging the stories and voices of white people (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). In contrast, counterstorytelling as a methodological tool can counter these ideologies and the narrow claims that educational institutions, educators, and society make about people who are often on the margins (Delgado, 1989). Counterstorytelling tackles white supremacy, rejects notions of neutrality, and centers the voices and knowledge of people of Color. Oftentimes in ELA classrooms, Black youth encounter curricula and texts that sustain the dominant narratives; these dominant stories send Black youth negative messages and inaccurate depictions about their identity, race, culture, and language. What I find striking is that novels such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Animal Farm*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Odyssey*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby* dominate the past and current landscape of many middle school and high school ELA classrooms. Therefore, ELA classrooms must become spaces that counter dominant narratives by centering the voices of youth of Color and creating assignments that allow youth of Color to speak back to the dominant narratives by writing or telling their stories.

In the sections that follow, I unpack three research stories to analyze the dehumanization of Black bodies such as Michael Brown, my own racialized experiences during my visit to Ferguson, Missouri, during the 2014 Ferguson Uprising, and my attempts to infuse these realities into a secondary ELA classroom.

Research Findings

Research Story 1: Michael Brown

I did not initially enter the community of Ferguson with the intention of engaging in research. I entered as a Black man who wanted to be in solidarity with a community. My research grew from a hurt heart and with pain; it did not start with

a set of research questions. My embodied experiences led to the formation of my research inquiries. I understand there is no distance between Michael Brown, other Black Brothas, and myself. I call them Brothas from the soulful and rich language of Black people—a language that intricately connects family, community, and personal identity. I call them Brothas because I, too, am a Black male whose flesh has been scarred by the pain and the wounds of racism throughout educational spaces and society at large. I understand my Black male body is not exempted from the physical and the symbolic racial violence that runs rampant throughout society. Even when Black males sit in privileged positions (e.g., tenure-track appointments, department chair, dean, president), our bodies are still subjected to racial violence (Johnson & Bryan, 2016).

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black youth, was brutally murdered by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri. According to Michael Brown's friend and key witness, Dorian Johnson, Brown and Johnson were walking on the street just a few feet from their destination when Darren Wilson exclaimed, "Get the fuck on the sidewalk or get the fuck out the street" (Jefferson-Griffen, 2015, p. 45). According to Johnson, he and Brown responded that they were only a minute away from their final destination (McLaughlin, 2014). Many believed that Wilson was not pleased with the youth simply because they did not respond to him, a white law enforcer, in what society deems a respectful manner (Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015; McLaughlin, 2014). Consequently, Wilson's dehumanizing request and language only exacerbated the situation.

Immediately, Wilson became physically aggressive with the young men, which led to the murder of Michael Brown (Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015). I am in agreement with Stovall (2015) when he states, "the officer's response is not to discharge the weapon to stop or frighten Michael Brown. The intent is to put the 'target' down. Brown is no longer human. He is the target. He is state property. If he cannot be contained, he is to be killed" (p. 68). Although the reports leading up to the death of Michael Brown are unclear, no one should lose their life for walking in the street. Brown's body lay in the stifling summer heat for over four hours. This horrendous act led the citizens of Ferguson to stand firm in the quest for racial justice. During this historical moment, the world witnessed the city of Ferguson pushing back against a system that not only physically and spiritually killed a Black life (Michael Brown) but also abuses and kills Black lives in general.

During this troubling time, we saw a kinship, revolutionary struggle, and acts of solidarity between Ferguson protesters and Palestinian activists and citizens (Davis, 2015). The pain and suffering experienced (as a result of racism, mass incarceration, the prison industrial complex, displacement of land, etc.) was illustrated through Palestinians' words of encouragement, empathy, and solidarity, such as the references made to tear gas produced in the United States (see Figure 1). Social media and Twitter provided an interactive view of the streets of Ferguson. As Twitter notifications of #Ferguson flooded people's timelines, another stream of tweets began to circulate comparing the streets of Ferguson to the Palestinian uprising that was simultaneously unfolding. It is beyond the scope of this paper

to unpack the ongoing history of Palestinian oppression and the conflict between Palestine and Israel (see Davis, 2015); however, it is important to note that prior to the 2014 Ferguson uprising, Palestinians resisted control, repression, and violence through peaceful protests and marches. Many times, the Palestinian protesters were disrupted by military troops and police officers who entered their communities with battle tanks, tear gas, and weapons of mass destruction (Davis, 2015). Palestinians utilized social media and Twitter to create and express international solidarity *for* and *with* Black folks who were uprising in Ferguson.



FIGURE 1.

Reflecting upon Michael Brown's story, I acknowledge the pivotal role literacy plays in the response to racial violence. The transnational solidarity between Black and Palestinian communities illuminates how Black and Brown communities have used Black Twitter as a form of literacy to fight against police brutality, anti-blackness, and racial violence. Black Twitter is a digitized space that promotes political organizing, solidarity, protest, critical literacy, and both physical and symbolic resistance to anti-black violence and police brutality within the United States (Hill, 2018). Hill (2018) explains that Black Twitter is a digital counterpublic—"any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities" (p. 287).

After the unjust killing of Michael Brown, Black people expressed their frustration and anger through participation in real-time discussions pertaining to the dehumanization of Black lives in the United States, anti-black racism, the school-to-prison pipeline, Black culture, and Black politics. At the same time it was used to engage in critical and humanizing dialogue, Black Twitter was utilized as a space that focused on the body in practices of resistance. The tweets show how activ-

ists and community members protected themselves against the physical violence of tear gas. A CREE lens draws attention to how activist movements both in the United States and abroad center race and racial violence in their societal analysis and how literacies might also be mobilized for resistance. I decided I needed to learn firsthand from the on-the-ground movement in Ferguson.

Research Story 2: My Journey to Ferguson

On September 27, 2014, I took a journey to Ferguson. After the unjust killing of Michael Brown, the city of Ferguson became a space where Black lives continued to be rejected through the enforcement of national guardsmen and militarized police officers who shot rubber bullets and tear gas at protesters. Although the residents of Ferguson and the nonresidents who were there in solidarity encountered militarized forces, they continued to write, speak, draw, sing, and chant their struggle and presence into existence. As I walked through the community, I took pictures of memorial plots, protest signs, and the Michael Brown paraphernalia that hung from the windows inside of homes. One such sign encapsulated much of the sentiment in the city, stating, “R.I.P. Mike Brown”; “They can burn, shoot rubber bullets, throw tear gas, but you can’t stop us!!”; “No Justice, No Peace”; and “Arrest Darren Wilson” (see Figure 2).



FIGURE 2.

One particular spot ignited a blaze of emotions within me (see Figure 3). There were red, white, and blue balloons that, to me, symbolized the United States; teddy bears and stuffed animals that symbolized childhood and innocence; a graduation picture of Brown that represented young, Black males and the pursuit of education. These symbolic images were resting on the words “R.I.P. MIKE BROWN” written on the concrete in black and red spray paint over the preserved remnants of his blood.



FIGURE 3.

As a Black male, I knew Brown was not murdered by a single police officer as much as he was killed by the system in the United States (Hill, 2018; Taylor, 2016). I am reminded of the children, youth, and adults who have actively engaged in the pulling apart of Brown’s humanity through the adoption of racist stereotypes and oppressive ideologies as they view(ed) his murder as just another Black male teenager being responsible for his own death. Michael Brown’s body signifies the struggle of living and of moving freely in a society where Black bodies are deemed less than worthy of human life. In many ways, his body illustrates the past and present dehumanization of Black lives.

The Black body has been and continues to be painted as violent and dangerous. Black peoples’ bodies have encountered physical abuse and disdain since chattel

slavery (e.g., Fanon, 2004; Matias, 2016; Woodson, 1933/2000). The negative discourse and (mis)readings of Black bodies continue to be perpetuated by whiteness and sustained by the white gaze. Yuan (2017) reminds us of the importance of understanding the Black body from a sociopolitical perspective and seeing the Black body as a form of resistance and an embodied action. Thus, the coupling of the body and literacy makes for a generative line of inquiry. The pictures and artifacts from my journey to Ferguson represent the multimodal nature of the literacy practices around the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The graffiti visuals, protest signs, and memorial plots are all complex counterhegemonic texts that disrupt the dominant white discourse around Black bodies while simultaneously illuminating the realities of racial violence pertaining to Black lives.

Looking at the multimodal nature of the literacy practices around the #BlackLivesMatter Ferguson experience led me to focus on the various ways knowledge is represented and how meaning is made through semiotic resources (e.g., language, images, gesture, etc.) (Fei, O'Halloran, Tan, & Marissa, 2015). In this particular case, the spray painting of activist slogans on the pavement still marked with blood is a vivid image and multimodal text that speaks to the horrific violence that is perpetrated on Black bodies. Semiotic modes such as art, language, gesture, and the body are mobilized in revolutionary ways that protest against and draw attention to dehumanization, violence, anti-blackness, and political and economic inequities. In this case, the memorial plots, protest signs, and graffiti tags that were highlighted in Ferguson challenged the dominant discourse of how the world saw Michael Brown, and represented various modes and media used to express concerns such as Black suffering, stop-and-frisk policies, militarized police, and the oversurveillance of Black bodies. The visit to Ferguson prompted me to reconsider the fundamentals of the ELA classroom, including what counts as literacy, what counts as text, whose knowledge and experiences matter, and what values drive the curriculum.

Research Story 3: CREE in the Classroom

As a former secondary ELA teacher and a survivor of the traditional model of school, I knew I had to incorporate a critical race curriculum that dismantled the conventional curriculum and standards, objectives, and instructional practices that permeate ELA classrooms. We know all too well that the traditional ELA curriculum mirrors westernized perspectives. It does not provide us with the resources to discuss race and racial disparities in manners that are beneficial and liberating to those who are oppressed by racism.

To address this, I strategically infused a critical race analysis of anti-blackness, whiteness, power, and white supremacy throughout my daily lessons and instructional practices. Prior to my journey to Ferguson, I had begun to teach from a critical race standpoint. The following vignette occurred in the freshman ELA classroom featured in my prelude to this article, before my trip to Ferguson: As for most secondary-aged students, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) was a required text (this is still true in the current ELA curriculum). Although this book engaged the topic of race, it focused on race from a eurocentric stance. The character of

Atticus Finch could be viewed as a white savior—the *heroic* upper-middle-class white male who *saves* the innocent Black male who is on trial for allegedly raping a white woman. The savior mentality blocks white people from being conscious of their own privilege and of systemic oppression (Matias, 2016). Knowing the discussion of the white savior complex is often absent from secondary ELA classrooms, I believed it was essential for me to problematize Atticus Finch's character and how the savior complex perpetuates racial subjugation and the omission of voices of Color.

In preparation for a lesson on character analysis in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the students and I read an excerpt from Matias (2016) about the white savior complex. I showed them clips from the movies *The Blind Side* (2009) and *Freedom Writers* (2007). In these Hollywood films, white women are portrayed as saviors or missionaries who have come to “rescue” youth from low, impoverished Black communities. After critically reading multiple texts, the students and I discussed whether or not Atticus Finch was truly a protagonist and the hero. In South Carolina, where I taught high school English, Standard 8.1 indicates that students must analyze how characters or a series of ideas or events are introduced, connected, and developed within a particular context (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). I created critical race objectives because they were not included in the original standard objectives. Matias (2013) states that critical race objectives “strategically and directly link the content objective to an overarching CRT analysis of how oppressions of race, class, and gender are operating within that content itself” (p. 191). For example, if the content objective is that students will be able to analyze characters, settings, and ideas as they unfold and intersect across a particular context, then from a critical race English educator's stance, students will be able to critically discuss the role the white savior complex plays in the character development of Atticus Finch and how the geographical context of the South during the 1930s influences his development as a character. Critical race objectives create a contested space within ELA classrooms that works to counter the normativity of whiteness and racism in the curriculum and standards while promoting racial dialogue, justice, and healing.

As I reflect on these three stories, my criticality about what English language arts is and what English language arts classrooms should look like has deepened. Schools are riddled with the misperception that ELA is about skill and drill and teaching students how to read. Now that I have fleshed out the CREE perspective, I understand that humanization should be at the nexus of ELA classrooms. Similarly, the above vignettes and CREE have demonstrated to me that justice movements are connected to ELA classrooms. Concordantly, the social movements of Black youths' protests and resistance are also examples of New Literacies movements that include the chants and phrases that are created to speak back to and against the debasement of Black humanity, an artistic component that illustrates not only the ongoing struggle of being Black but also the beauty of Blackness. The redesign of curricula and policies has the potential to redefine literacy (i.e., critical media awareness) by connecting students to on-the-ground social movements, incorpo-

rating activist literacies and texts, building curricula off students' own testimonials, creating a classroom culture of collective care and action, etc. (see Kynard, 2013; Richardson, 2003).

CREE: Insights for Literacy Classrooms

This section is not intended to be a “how-to guide” or a “cookie-cutter” demonstration of how to *do* CREE. Oftentimes, when it comes to equity-based pedagogies such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), many educators want step-by-step instructions. In order for one to understand how CREE looks in practice, I surmise that one's state of *being*, *heart*, and *mind* has to change. I am in agreement with Palmer (1998) that “teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness for better or worse” (p. 2). As we teach, we invariably cast our beliefs and values onto our students, our content, our instructional practices, and our ways of being together. Thus, educators are doing a disservice to all children, in particular Black children, when our knowledge base of other people's children (Delpit, 1995) remains static.

CREE Beyond Black Lives

Although CREE highlights anti-black racism and speaks to the experiences of Black lives, I want to make clear that this is not to negate anti-brown racism, the experiences of other minoritized groups, or other lines of inquiry around Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous youth. CREE is a movement of solidarity. I am also talking to my Brown and Indigenous brothers and sisters. Understanding CREE as an act of solidarity can assist teachers' pedagogical practices by helping them explore and illuminate the historical, political, cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic solidarity that exists between Black, Latinx, and Indigenous groups. Furthermore, educators must provide Black and Brown students with in-school and out-of-school spaces that allow them to make sense of their shared and collective experiences. Martinez (2017) argues, “Unquestionably, Black and Latinx youth experience violence on a daily basis, in and out of schools, as their bodies are racialized, their utterances marked, and their dispositions questioned for not aligning with the expectations of dominant culture” (p. 182). The unjust killings of Jessica “Jessie” Hernandez (Colorado), Jonathen Santellana (Texas), and Pedro Villanueva and Anthony Nuñez (California) illustrate how racial violence can be extrapolated across other minoritized groups.

I contend that CREE can sharpen our understandings about Black struggle and freedom, shed light on the humanity of Black lives through already developed constructs that work to better educate Black people and extend the conversation about English education's role in the struggle for racial justice in a time when Black lives are continuously debased. In an effort to move from racial violence to racial justice, I charge educators across all disciplines to cultivate CREE as part of their conceptual frameworks for teaching and learning.

(Re)imagining ELA Classrooms

Literacy scholars, English educators, and ELA teachers cannot fully utilize CREE if they do not embrace and live within the radical imagination. To (re)imagine ELA classrooms, educators have to work to create the world that we hope to see. Embracing the radical imagination requires English educators, literacy scholars, and ELA teachers to humanize English courses and language and literacy education (Johnson, 2017) and to foster a love of Blackness as a counternarrative to prevailing discourses of deficit. This love for Blackness must be poured into curricular decisions. Furthermore, this deep-seated love can move us toward humanization and away from oppression and marginalization. hooks (2003) illuminates love as a pedagogical tool and action that should be expressed in classrooms. Ultimately, CREE supports educators in (re)imagining how Blackness is highlighted and employed in classroom spaces.

I envision classrooms where the stories of Black people are told through liberatory literacy practices such as movement, media, art, song, dance, and poetry. I envision classrooms where educators *love* the multiple ways people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds express their pain and work toward liberation. I imagine classrooms where Black children are taught to love every ounce of their Blackness and that, as Africa's children, they are born from generations of kings and queens, scientists, writers, and mathematicians, from resilience and determination. I imagine classrooms where educators believe in the possibility of Black children and youth—classrooms where Black students know their Black skin, education, health, spirit, voice, life, and humanity *do* matter. Lastly, I imagine classrooms where the teachers and students all have riots in their souls (Baszile, 2006) and are not afraid to join the revolution in a time of racial chaos by making a commitment to racial justice—a commitment to *their* cause, *our* cause, and the cause of human freedom.

NOTE

I have purposefully chosen to capitalize *Black* and other racialized language to show a radical love (see hooks, 2003) for Black and Brown people who are constantly wounded by white supremacy. In conjunction, I have chosen to disassemble white supremacy in my language by lowercasing the “w” in *white* and *white supremacy* as well as the “e” in *eurocentric*. Furthermore, see Cheryl E. Matias's (2016) “White Skin, Black Friend: A Fanonian Application to Theorize Racial Fetish in Teacher Education.”

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