The Stories They Tell: Mainstream Media, Pedagogies of Healing, and Critical Media Literacy

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Pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy are important, especially in the wake of racial violence when mainstream media work to stigmatize, characterize, and marginalize Black youth by projecting them as *dangerous Others*. In this article, we offer an overview of how mainstream media reinscribe and reinforce white supremacy, which leads to anti-blackness. Next, we discuss the impact that uncritical consumption of mainstream media narratives of Black people has on media consumers and how Black youth use social media as counterspaces. We then theorize about pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy as tools to encourage Black youth to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives. We conclude with sample lesson plans and a discussion of how English educators have a responsibility to use our discipline to transform our world and raise awareness of the crisis of racial injustice.

> *If you aren't careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.*
> —Malcolm X, *At The Audubon, 1964*

> *Rather than seen as victims, Black youth are vilified, and viewed as suspicious, delinquent or dangerous by mass media.*
> —Henry Giroux, *The Fire This Time, 2015*

When we first began writing this article in October 2015, we were witnessing mainstream media's coverage of a 16-year-old Black student at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, who was assaulted in her math class by a White school resource officer. Allegedly, the girl, whose name was not released, failed to comply with requests made by her teacher and a school administrator to leave the classroom,[1] and therefore, resource officer Ben Fields was called to remove her. The incident, captured by stu-

dents on cell-phone video, shows the girl sitting at her desk when the officer grabs her and tosses her around like a rag doll. There were many conflicting views about the nature of the incident. For example, Harry Houck, an analyst from CNN—a major force in world news and information delivery—argued: "If that girl got out of the seat when she was told, there'd be no problem. But apparently she had no respect for the school, no respect for her teacher, probably has no respect at home or on the street, and that's why she acted the way she did" ("She Had No Respect," 2015). Rather than seeing the girl as the victim, Houck faulted her for the attack, which is troublesome but unsurprising, given mainstream media's coverage of brutality against Black bodies. Aside from victim blaming, Houck attempted to legitimize the brutality "through a discourse of demonization, stereotypes, and objectification" (Giroux, 2015) in his assumptions about her lack

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of respect. Others, such as cultural critic and CNN commentator Marc Lamont Hill, had a drastically different perspective from Houck's. Hill (2015) emphatically asserted in a tweet following the incident that "NOBODY would be asking what that little girl did to deserve a police assault if she were white." Hill's tweet problematizes media perspectives such as Houck's that fail to acknowledge the intersections of race and police brutality, especially when it comes to Black youth. Despite Hill's important critique, Houck's perspective could carry more weight with media consumers given his role as an analyst with CNN and Hill's as a commenter. Moreover, Hill's critique was put out via Twitter, whereas Houck's was broadcasted on national television.

For us, Houck's comment captures the critical role that mainstream media play in the "debasement of Black humanity, utter indifference to Black suffering, and the denial of Black people's right to exist" (Jefferies, 2014). Furthermore, the Spring Valley incident reminds us that schools and classrooms are not exempt from assault against Black bodies. In other words, the same racist brutality toward Black citizens that we see happening on the streets across the United States mirrors the violence toward Black students that is happening in our nation's *academic* streets. As Black women, mothers of Black children,[2] educators, critical scholars, and spiritual beings,[3] we are devastated by the ubiquitous assault against Black people, and we know that Black children are suffering too. For example, Tony Robinson, a Black student who witnessed the assault against the Spring Valley student, was quoted as saying:

> I've never seen anything so nasty looking, so sick to the point that you know, other students are turning away, don't know what to do, and are just scared for their lives. That's supposed to be somebody that's going to protect us. Not somebody that we need to be scared of, or afraid. That was wrong. There's no justifiable reason for why he did that to that girl. ("Sheriff: Decision on School Officer," 2015)

We are deeply concerned with the wounds that Black youth like Tony endure from watching "as their peers have been accosted by the police, harassed, beaten [or] killed" (Giroux, 2015). We are equally concerned with the wounds inflicted upon them by the negative images and language that agents and forces within mainstream media used to project them as *dangerous Others* (Mahiri, 2004).[4]

In response to these wounds, we offer an overview of how mainstream media reinscribe and reinforce white supremacy, which leads to anti-blackness. Next, we discuss the effect that uncritical consumption of mainstream media narratives of Black people can have on media consumers and Black youth and how Black youth are using social media as counterspaces to such narratives. We then theorize the potential for pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy to encourage Black youth to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives that mainstream media use to construct and oppress them. Finally, we conclude with sample lesson plans and a discussion of how English educators have a responsibility to use our discipline "to transform our world and raise awareness of the crisis of racial injustice" (NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus, 2015[5]).

Critical Perspectives: The Media Ain't Never Loved Us

Our elders taught us long ago about media injustice. Malcolm X warned in 1964 that the press is irresponsible: "It will make the criminal look like [s]he's the victim and make the victim looks like [s]he's the criminal" (Breitman, 1965, p. 93). This reversal was evident in the cases of George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin in 2012; Darren Wilson and Mike Brown in 2014; and Brian Encinia and Sandra Bland in 2015. In 1992, hooks pointed out that we are socialized within a racist mass media that convince Black people that Black lives (and Black life) are not complex or worthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection. This systematic racist representation is evidenced by Fox News commentators, who blamed gangs, schools, and the welfare system for the Baltimore uprisings (Giroux, 2015) instead of examining the systemic racist violence against Black people who—like activist Fannie Lou Hamer— are "sick and tired of being sick and tired" (Brooks & Houck, 2011, p. 62).

Savali (2015) maintains that "the American people are being force-fed a diet of stereotypes and misperceptions, overcriminalization and marginalizing of Black Americans through language, images and omissions." Similarly, hooks (1992) argues that images of Black people in mainstream media are often used to maintain white supremacy:

> Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of Black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by White people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/Black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism. (p. 1)

In the section below, we illustrate the ways in which mainstream media reinscribe and reinforce white supremacy.

Patterns of Media Injustice

In her overview of patterns of media injustice, Johnson (2015) provides examples of how mainstream media humanize White people while simultaneously vilifying Black people and other people of color. Below, we provide a synthesis of six patterns that have played out in the wake of racial violence.

#1: Humanizing White Criminals—Dehumanizing Black Victims

According to Johnson (2015), mainstream media rarely posit Black people in positive ways. Even when Black people are victims of violence, it is rare that their accomplishments are named in the media. Conversely, the media are careful about how they represent White criminals, usually portraying them sympathetically. This more nuanced portrayal was evident in the case of Adam Lanza and James Holmes, both young White males who were responsible for mass shootings. Many of the headlines in the media described the killers as "quiet," "smart," "nice," and "typical American Boy[s]." By contrast, Black people—suspects or not—are often not given these same considerations.

#2: Compromising Photos of Black Victims

Johnson (2015) also asserts that mainstream media are biased when it comes to the kinds of photos used to portray Black victims in comparison to White victims and criminals. When the victim or criminal is White, the media tend to use photos that paint a positive picture of the victim's life. In the case of Black victims, however, media outlets tend to use compromising and damaging photos. This pattern was obvious with the photos that were used to

personate unarmed shooting victim Mike Brown, who was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Most of the photos that were used distorted Brown's identity and portrayed him as a violent thug with gang affiliations. For instance, many media outlets used a photo of Brown holding up a peace sign, which many misinterpreted as a gang sign. It was rare to find media outlets that used photos of Brown with his family members or wearing a cap and gown from his high school graduation. This inconsistency prompted Twitter user @CJLawrenceEsq to create the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown "to make a statement about how the media draws a biased narrative when it comes to telling the stories of Black [people]" (Callahan, 2014).

#3: Lone Wolf Characterization of White Criminals

Johnson (2015) emphasizes that when White suspects commit crimes, mainstream media tend to humanize the suspects' reasons for committing the crime. For example, phrases such as "he was bullied," "she had a troubled past," "he had a hard home life," or even "he suffered from mental illness" are frequently used to justify the crimes committed by White suspects. In cases where empathy is not shown, White suspects get characterized as a "lone wolf." The lone wolf narrative attempts to shift our attention away from how these acts are part of a legacy of terrorist attacks committed by White supremacists. This pattern was demonstrated in the case of Dylan Roof, who brutally murdered nine Black people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Many media outlets described Roof as a "white supremacist lone wolf" and commented, "we don't know why he did this." Conversely, the media's framing of crimes committed by Black people and other people of color tend to perpetuate stereotypes about the entire community they represent. This was evident in the media's coverage of Micah Xavier Johnson, the Dallas shooter who killed five police officers. Because Johnson was Black and was upset over the deaths of Black men at the hands of police, several media outlets linked Johnson's violent act to the Black Lives Matter organization in an effort to frame the group as anti-police.

#4: Black Children Represented as Adults

Johnson (2015) suggests that within mainstream media, young Black victims, particularly Black boys, tend to be presented as guilty adults. Black youth and children are hardly ever portrayed as victims or labeled as "children" in the media in comparison to young White victims and suspects. Studies have shown that implicit racist biases lead Black boys to be viewed as much older and less innocent than White boys (Goff, 2014). This bias was evident in the

case of 12-year-old shooting victim Tamir Rice, who was killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio. Unfortunately, Rice was not viewed as "a boy playing with a toy in the park, but a Black male with a gun" (O'Malley, 2014). Many media outlets characterized Rice as "big for his age," as if this was a sufficient reason for the cause of his death.

#5: Self-Defense vs. "Guilty Until Proven Innocent"

Johnson (2015) argues that mainstream media frequently describe White suspects as (re)acting in self-defense for their violent acts and, thus, should not be deemed guilty. In contrast, a Black suspect (or victim) is viewed through a lens of "guilty until proven innocent." This pattern was evident in the murder of Renisha McBride, an unarmed young Black woman, who was killed in 2013 by Theodore Wafer, a White man, for knocking on his door after she was involved in a car accident near Wafer's home. Though Wafer was eventually found guilty of second-degree murder, many mainstream media outlets initially focused on whether McBride was drunk or high as opposed to focusing on why Wafer shot and killed McBride before calling 911.

#6: Double Standard Depictions of Justice Movements

Johnson (2015) insists that there is a double standard when it comes to mainstream media's depictions of justice movements. As illustrated during the Ferguson[6] and Baltimore[7] uprisings, many mainstream media outlets described protesters as "thugs" and "animals" who participate in "looting" and "destroy their communities." These same adjectives and verbal markers are not typically coupled with White people who engage in riots following sporting events and festivities.[8]

Mainstream Media's White Supremacy and Anti-Blackness

The six aforementioned patterns of media injustice illustrate the longstanding, deep, and abiding connection between mainstream media and white supremacy that hooks (1992) critiques below:

> The institutionalization of white supremacy via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people. Long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and Black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave. From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that the control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. (p. 2)

Theorists and practitioners in media studies acknowledge that media are a "powerful instrument of knowledge production that is used by the

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powerful in society to configure social thought" (Morrell, 2008, p. 157). Hence, constructing images that promote racial inferiority contributes to a lack of empathy for Black life. Because of this lack of empathy, society becomes desensitized to Black suffering and Black humanity. Desensitization of brutal violence and death of Black people, such as seeing video clips on social media of those who were murdered in real-time

(e.g., LaQuan McDonald, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile) become part of the normal order of business. Undoubtedly, these dehumanizing portrayals of Black people in media are part of a historical lineage that continues to support a white supremacist agenda that leads to anti-blackness.[9]

Mainstream Media Narratives' Impact on Black People

According to Robinson, executive director of ColorofChange.org, "Repeated exposure to unbalanced and distorted portrayals of Black people in media leads to the development of implicit biases against them" ("Not to Be Trusted," 2015, p. 3). For example, patterns in portrayals of Black people in the media can (1) promote antagonism toward the Black community, (2) promote exaggerated views of Black people related to criminality and violence, and (3) reduce attention to structural and other big-picture factors that affect the Black community, such as racial inequalities ("Media Representations and Impact," 2012). These distorted patterns of portrayals not only influence the public's understandings and attitudes toward Black youth, but also on how these youth view themselves and their communities. Uncritical consumption of mainstream media narratives about Black people can have a negative impact on Black youths' self-esteem and cognitive development (Tan & Tan, 1979) and can lead to serious social and psychological problems (Nightingale, 1993). hooks agrees that many Black people are deeply wounded by the negative representations of blackness:

> For Black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted.

These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter. (p. 4)

The depths of pain and rage that hooks describes are evidenced in video[10] footage of a Baltimore youth who was expressing his frustration over the killing of Freddie Gray at the hands of police officers. In the middle of an uprising where police officers were dressed in riot gear and prepared to attack the community members, the teen was captured yelling:

> Look how they [police officers] lined up.
> They ready to kill us!
> They ready to kill us!
> And guess what?
> I'ma die for what I stand for

The teen presents a chilling reminder of how disheartened many Black youth are by the "debasement of Black humanity" and "the denial of Black people's right to exist" (Jefferies, 2014). The young man also illustrates the ways in which Black youth are not simply consumers of media, but they are also challenging and resisting societal narratives that have been written about them by "producing counter-knowledge through the manipulation of media tools" (Morrell, 2008, p. 158)—in this case, YouTube. According to Morrell, youth-produced media have always contributed to social change and making young people aware of injustice.

Social Media Counterspaces for Black Youth

In the wake of racial violence, new media, such as Black Twitter, have become powerful voices and new forms of social activism for Black youth (and the Black community in general). Black Twitter is a counterspace created by Black Twitter users within the Twitter social network that represents Black perspectives and provides a platform where Black users can control their images, produce counternarratives, express their opinions, voice their concerns, and locate more reliable news and information about the Black community. Black Twitter users' loosely coordinated interactions tend to accumulate into trending topics (Ramsey, 2015). For instance, social justice–driven hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #AmINext, #ShutItDown, and #ICantBreathe illustrate how "Black Twitter is successfully harnessing the power of its collective identity in order to express the views and beliefs of a group that is marginalized by dominant ideas in mainstream media" (Williams & Domoszlai, 2013).

Black Twitter has certainly been instrumental in taking action on

race-related issues and has provided a counterspace for Black perspectives in social media; however, it alone cannot dismantle racial violence and counter the damaging narratives that mainstream media outlets continue to write about Black youth and other people of color. We agree with Morrell (2008) that it is critical for educators to prepare all youth "to critique these master media narratives [and provide youth with] the skills to use new media technology as tools in the struggle for social and educational justice" (p. 158). As critical English educators, we feel a particular responsibility to equip teachers with transformative tools that work toward healing Black youth and supporting them in speaking back to and against racial violence. In the next section, we write about pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy as tools to assist all young people with becoming more informed consumers and producers of media.

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Praxis and Implications for English Education: So What We Gon' Do?

In the July 2016 *English Education* themed issue, "Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter: New Literacies for a New Era," Sealey-Ruiz argues, "instruction must be urgent and purposeful in responding to and anticipating the social context of our times" (p. 295). In the wake of racial violence, we argue that it is important for educators to engage in revolutionary praxis by reimagining their classrooms as spaces for triage, self-care, healing, and social transformation. We believe that English classrooms are particularly well-suited for such healing and critical work, along with Sealey-Ruiz, who contends that:

> English and literacy educators are in a unique position to interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations. . . . [T]he tools we have at our disposal (writing, visual arts, spoken word, and other modalities more readily accepted in English and literacy classrooms) provide an outlet to discuss, critique, and dismantle this violence. (p. 294)

In the sections below, we discuss how critical media literacy can be used as an approach that (1) works toward healing the wounds of youth who are affected by racial violence and (2) provides youth with opportunities to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives that mainstream media and other social institutions use to construct and oppress Black youth.

Critical Media Literacy as a Pedagogy of Healing

A pedagogy of healing is increasingly necessary and important in a time when Black youth are feeling wounded, weary, and dispirited by the ubiquitous assault against Black bodies and a burgeoning media culture that works to stigmatize, criminalize, demonize, and objectify them. Hill (2009), through his work on "wounded healers" in an English classroom, found that youth were able to "find varying levels of insight, relief, support, empathy, and critique within a Hip Hop Lit community for their personal and ideological wounds" (p. 74). Like Hill, our use of healing "neither presumes nor suggests a completed medical, psychological, or ideological recovery" (p. 74). Rather, our notion of healing refers to a process whereby teachers use curriculum and instruction as a kind of "catharsis, a letting out of emotions that become painful or even dangerous if they remain internalized" (Morrell, 2008, p. 169).

The pedagogy of healing that we describe in this article consists of two sets of tools: (1) tools to heal: *acknowledging that the wound exists and identifying its culprit*, and (2) tools to transform: *responding to the wound using a tool that works to transform the conditions that led to the wound* (e.g., critical media pedagogy, urban debate, critical language pedagogy, hip-hop based pedagogy, critical race pedagogy). The tools within a healing pedagogical framework are responsive to the needs of a given situation. In this case, because we are concerned with the troubling and damaging narratives that mainstream media use to construct and oppress Black youth, the tool that we use to work toward transforming these conditions is critical media literacy. By critical media literacy, we mean "the educational process that makes young people aware of the role that media play, both positively and problematically, in shaping social thought" (Morrell, Duenas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2012, p. 3). According to Morrell (2008), "Critical media literacies can serve as protection against alienation, depression, eating disorders, violence, and a host of other ills that can be linked, at least in part, to the uncritical consumption mainstream media texts" (p. 161). In the struggle for racial justice, critical media literacy can be a powerful tool that Black youth can use to deconstruct and rewrite the troubling and damaging narratives that mainstream media use to construct and oppress them.

In our work we build on Morrell's (2008) notion of critical media literacy pedagogy, which involves counterhegemonic instruction of three key components: *critical consumption*, *production*, and *distribution* of new media texts. Critical consumption explains the process of exposing youth to the dangers of mainstream media, developing their consciousness of the

role mainstream media play in configuring social thought, and providing them the critical skills necessary to deconstruct dominant media narratives. While it is important for youth to acquire the critical skills necessary to deconstruct media narratives, Morrell argues that awareness of critical consumption without production and distribution is counterproductive. In other words, if we only prepare Black youth to be critical of the ways that mainstream media outlets uphold white supremacy and negatively characterize them, we miss an opportunity to illustrate the role that youth-produced media can play in working toward social change. With this in mind, it is important for educators to explore how a critical media literacy pedagogy can support youth in using new media genres to produce and distribute their own countermedia texts. Production and distribution components of critical media pedagogy go hand in hand and involve preparing youth to be agents of change by producing "counter-knowledge through the manipulation of media tools" (Morrell, 2008, p. 158).

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Teaching Black youth to be critical of the mainstream agenda and to advocate for themselves by becoming authors of their own stories can be a powerful act of social activism and is essential for social transformation. Not only does this type of teaching encourage critical thinking, it also "produces powerful and empowered literacy learning" (Morrell, 2008, p. 156). McArthur (2016) provides several examples of the literacy skills gained when using critical media literacy for social activism in English classrooms and programs designed for Black girls. In one program, McArthur reports that Black girls "deconstruct[ed] the media they engaged with and . . . create[d] counternarratives and push[ed] back against the hegemonic discourse around Black woman- and girlhood" (p. 374). She argues that using critical media literacy practices "transformed the literacies, identities, and activism of Black adolescent girls . . . within and beyond official school contexts" (p. 376).

Practical Classroom Applications for English Education

In the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) statement on #BlackLivesMatter, the professional association calls on its constituents to provide educators with the tools needed to transform our world in the fight against racial injustice. With this in mind, we offer a set of lesson plans that can help English educators imagine the kind of healing and critical work they can do in their classrooms on "Monday morning." Having already used

these activities in classrooms and workshops, we ascertain that they serve as powerful resources in the struggle for social justice. However, it is not our aim to create "blueprints for emancipatory practice" (Kirkland & Jackson, 2008, p. 179). To put it another way, we do not want to create a prescriptive pedagogy; instead, we offer these lessons as one of many approaches to incorporating pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy in the classroom.

In the section that follows, we outline four lesson plans. Each lesson contains four sections that lay out important information about the recommended activities: (1) a *motivational quote* that inspires the activity, (2) a *motivational question* that guides the activity, (3) *background information* that provides context and/or a brief summary of the literature that informs the activities, and (4) *directions* that outline how we previously implemented the activities. The first three sections (motivational quote, motivational question, and background information) of each lesson are intended to help teachers think about the activity in relation to the struggle for racial and educational justice. The last section (directions) provides teachers with a road map to implement each activity in their classroom. Please note that these activities do not necessarily have to follow the order we arranged them in, nor do they have to be used in conjunction with one another. Educators interested in implementing any of these activities should consider the dynamics of their own classrooms (e.g., grade level, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, and sexual identity of the students) in relation to their positionality before implementing or modifying these activities.

Lesson Plan One

Motivational Quote: "Stereotypes do exist, but we have to walk through them." —Forest Whitaker, *The Robertson Treatment*, 2010

Motivational Question: How can we create a space where students can dismantle, disrupt, dispute, and deconstruct the stereotypes that mainstream media use to construct oppressive narratives about them?

Background: Before teachers can draw from critical media literacy, they must create a space in their classrooms where students can engage in an open and honest dialogue about the root of stereotypes.

Directions: For this activity, students will engage in an exercise about stereotypes that are associated with identity markers. For this activity to work, tables and chairs should be arranged in a circular or semicircular fashion. Next, each student will take out a sheet of paper and write a 1–2

word description of their visible identity that they believe have led to mis-understandings or stereotypes. (Students should not include their name on the paper.) In 30-second rotations, students will send their identity marker papers around to each participant in the class, who will then write an image, idea, or widely held view that is used to categorize people with this identity marker. The rotations will continue until each student has had an opportunity to add a remark to each of their peers' papers. Once students receive their original sheet of paper back, they will be asked to take a few moments to review the remarks written on their paper and be prepared to discuss as a whole class. This activity should elicit a rich discussion and lead to conversation about stereotypes and how students can dismantle, disrupt, dispute, and deconstruct them. We also believe that this activity will prepare youth to critically examine the production and consumption of stereotypes used by mainstream media.

Lesson Plan Two

Motivational Quote: "The oppressed must not only learn the terms of their oppression, but they should also be able to create the conditions of their liberation." —Ed Brockenbrough, *Teaching Trayvon Martin*, 2012

Motivational Question: How can we inspire youth to work toward social transformation and justice by investigating the language, images, and narratives that mainstream media continue to write about them? How can youth *rewrite* and *dismantle* these troubling narratives?

Background: In *Street Scripts*, Mahiri (2004) considers how certain images and messages from agents and forces within dominant culture have subtly and not-so-subtly worked to stigmatize, characterize, and marginalize Black youth as "dangerous Others": gang members, drug dealers, juvenile delinquents, and criminals. bell hooks (1992) mentions that even some agents and forces with good intentions have a way of reinforcing negative images of Black youth by projecting them animalistically as an endangered species. For example, a huge billboard near an urban high school that reads "Not Another Dead Child" was designed as part of a campaign to prevent youth violence. However, the message "also served to emphasize above all the violence in the environments in which these youth live" (Mahiri, 2004, p. 22).

Directions: Building on Morrell's (2005) idea of using critical English education to examine literacies in the new media age, 3–4 students will be asked to work together to investigate the language that mainstream media

use to construct Black youth. In the example below, we used billboard signs to model how teachers can engage youth in an analysis of the language, images, and narratives that mainstream media have constructed about them. Teachers could also consider using news clips, music, videos, newspaper articles, blogs, radio, etc. as alternative media spaces.

Part A: Keeping the above-mentioned background information in mind, teachers could have their students analyze the (subtle and not-so subtle) images and messages that are used to construct them in the billboard samples (or mainstream media space) that they were provided. Teachers should consider having their students answer the following questions: What narrative is being written about Black youth? How could this narrative stigmatize, characterize, and marginalize the Black youth represented in this media space?

Figure 1. Part A Billboard Activity

Part B: Mahiri (2004) contends that many young people are well aware of how public spaces of politics and the media construct them negatively, and some youth recognize that they are not mere reflections of these negative constructions. For this activity, teachers should encourage their students to create their own critical media texts (including social media) that speak back to and against the narrative that mainstream media tell about them.

For example, teachers might encourage youth to

1. Investigate who funded the billboard. What is the relationship between Black youth, the billboard message, and the company that paid for the advertisement?

2. Write a letter to the company responsible for the advertisement explaining how it negatively affects Black youth.

Create a Twitter campaign that speaks back to and against the narrative that the billboard tells about them.

Lesson Plan Three

Motivational Quote: "*Occupy Language* should concern itself with more than just the words we use; it should also work towards eliminating language-based racism and discrimination." —Samy Alim, *What If We Occupied Language*, 2011

Motivational Question: In what ways can we seek to affirm our students in an effort to occupy (their own) language(s) when combating discriminatory and oppressive texts and movements?

Background: For this activity, we rely on Alim's (2011) *What If We Occupied Language* to discuss how youth can serve as activists who advocate for themselves through language. Alim echoes the need for a transformation to occur with how we speak about and describe our youth. He states, "When some*one* is repeatedly described as some*thing,* language has quietly paved the way for violent action." We agree that occupying language should allow teachers and students to get their hands dirty and participate in eradicating language-based racism and discrimination as seen in mainstream media. We offer these activities as pedagogical tools as a way for English educators to work alongside students to name the oppression. Alim suggests that occupying language should

> expose how educational, political, and social institutions use language to further marginalize oppressed groups; resist colonizing language practices that elevate certain languages over others; resist attempts to define people with terms rooted in negative stereotypes; and begin to reshape the public discourse about our communities, and about the central role of language in racism and discrimination. (p. 4)

One example of involving Black youth in this work is by having them design

Figure 2. Sample Protest Sign "We Have a Voice . . . Let Us Speak"

protest signs. By doing so, they can create and draw from their own language(s) to create loving and accurate portrayals of their experiences.

Directions: Have students view a video clip or images that capture youth who can be seen protesting or working as activists and concerned citizens in the wake of racial and language-based discrimination by using protest signs. Next, invite your students

to participate in a discussion on the topic. *Listen* to them. Finally, teachers should have the class create protest signs that represent how they would occupy language or work as activists on behalf of themselves and other marginalized students.

Lesson Plan Four

Motivational Quote: "Writing is a space where students can learn to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question values, establish points of view, and reflect on beliefs that may contradict other people's beliefs." —Valerie Kinloch, *Harlem on Our Minds*, 2010

Motivational Question: In what ways might what Everett (2016) calls *Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives* (A LENs) function as a catalyst for unpacking the educational experiences of Black youth?

Background: Pahl and Rowsell (2010) argue that artifacts are particularly significant because they "provide a platform from which students can access literate identities" and "open up worlds that bring in new identities" (p. 64). Artifacts are heavy with meaning, and when students select artifacts to represent their experiences, it creates a powerful opportunity to listen and understand what students value. Everett (2016) takes up this notion of artifacts in her work as a way of understanding the lived experiences of academically high-performing young Black men. She offers A LENs as a conceptual framework for a layered project that incorporates artifacts, cultivates writing opportunities, and honors students' voices about their experiences as Black students in public schools.

Through this project, students will read, write about, and engage in dialogue about critical theories in education as they relate to their current schooling experiences. Altogether, their artifacts, writings, and dialogues provide "a lens" through which to understand their lived experiences as complex humans who are "negatively profiled and stereotyped" (Henfield, 2012). Like a corrective eyeglass or contact lens, their stories are to be illuminated to "correct," de-center, and disrupt "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) about Black youth. In this way, their experiences become the "focal point" and include their positionality (race, gender, class, etc.). The "focal point" in a corrective lens is the exact location where one's vision becomes clearest. Consequently, students evidence how their critical consciousness of their educational experiences complement, contradict, and get recycled within larger discourses on education, meritocracy, institutionalized racism, and individual agency.

Directions: In this assignment, invite students to reflect on how Lakoff and Johnson (2011) argue that we always use metaphors to better understand reality. Next, students will create (or purchase) a physical artifact that somehow represents their educational narrative experiences in school and reflect on these artifacts through dialogue with their classmates. Students will then write critically reflective narratives that name their educational experiences. In this narrative, the students will include discussion about their artifacts. In short, the students will have a narrative essay and an artifact that use critical theories in education to capture their experiences in education—their Artifactual LENs.

At the conclusion of the project, all students will engage in a gallery walk among their classmates. More specifically, they will (1) display a hardcopy of their essays on tables for everyone to read, (2) exhibit their physical artifact (described in the narrative), and (3) have a blank sheet of paper where fellow classmates can provide positive and constructive feedback. Students will be encouraged to visit all of their classmates' exhibitions. Afterwards, students will reflect (first written and then verbally) about A LENs. In this way, writing will become a catalyst for unpacking the experiences of the students and it also functions as a significant method of inquiry for students to name current realities and propose alternative realities.

Collective Applications of the Lessons

The lesson plans illustrate how educators can use their classrooms for healing and social transformation in the struggle for racial justice. In lesson one, we outlined an activity that prepares youth to critically examine the role of stereotypes in mainstream media. Part A of lesson two provides an opportunity for youth to use critical media literacy to examine the critical consumption and production of media that perpetuate damaging narratives about Black youth. In the second part of lesson two, youth explore the production and distribution components of critical medial literacy to produce and distribute countermedia texts. Lesson three uses critical media literacy to get youth to think deeply about the activist efforts and language involved in justice movements and how youth can work as activists on behalf of themselves and other marginalized groups. Finally, lesson four pushes youth to think about their educational experiences with regard to racial injustice. While this lesson plan does not deal directly with critical media literacy, the activities provide youth with a lens to see how the racial injustices reflected in our communities and in mainstream media mirror the injustices hap-

pening in educational institutions. Indeed, it is important for Black youth to understand that other social institutions are also complicit in constructing and producing damaging and oppressive narratives about them and other marginalized youth. In the wake of racial violence, providing youth with counterhegemonic critical media literacy instruction not only equips them with social activism tools that are necessary for social transformation, but it also equips them with tools that help them cope with the racial wounds and injustices that they endure, which is essential to the healing process.

Throughout this article, we were purposeful about discussing how a pedagogy of healing and critical media literacy can be used to support Black youth in the wake of racial violence. Though we recognize that other communities and youth of color are also affected by racial violence, we center this article on Black youth specifically because in 2015, Black people were killed by U.S. police "at twice the rate of White, Hispanic, and Native Americans, [and] the rate of death for young Black men was five times higher than White men of the same age" (Swaine, Laughland, Lartey, & McCarthy, 2015). Certainly, this epidemic violence disproportionately affects Black people. In this way, our intent is to provide a set of tools that could assist Black youth with healing their wounded spirits and tools that will assist them with fighting for their humanity. However, it is important for educators to understand that pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy are not limited to Black youth. It is our hope that educators will use these tools to examine, heal, and interrupt the narratives that mainstream media use to negatively portray other marginalized youth. Finally, it is important for educators to implement these same tools with White students who benefit from white supremacy and the damaging narratives that mainstream media produce about Black youth and other youth of color. Uncritical consumption of media narratives by White students can lead to these students being contributors or silent bystanders to racial injustice, inequality, Black suffering, and the debasement of Black humanity. We recommend that educators use the abovementioned counterhegemonic instruction to prepare White youth to become allies in the struggle for racial justice.

Teachers' Responsibility: You're Either Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem

"I imagine collectives of English educators who take to the STREETS, who LOBBY and ADVOCATE STRONGLY, who PROTEST, who seek to use the discipline to TRANSFORM THE WORLD!"

—Ernest Morrell, "Critical English Education," 2005

As a nation and profession, we should be alarmed that we are living in a moment in our history where it is natural for Black youth to ask, "Am I next?" (Levine, 2016). Morrell (2005) reminds us that English educators play a critical role in movements for educational and social justice. At this pivotal moment in the wake of racial violence, we call on English educators, regardless of racial and ethnic backgrounds, to examine, critique, and interrupt the grave injustices that are routinely committed against Black youth. To do this critical work, educators must see themselves as human rights workers (Kirkland, 2015), activists, and intellectuals and imagine their classrooms as spaces for healing, love, and justice. In teaching toward racial justice, educators must also become comfortable with being uncomfortable and vulnerable when engaging in conversations about racial injustice. Even the most well-intentioned educators avoid this topic in their classrooms for fear of misspeaking, sounding racist, not having answers, or causing more harm than help. We acknowledge that engaging in this kind of work requires courage and confidence, but as educators, we must understand that we will not always have the answers. We will not always feel brave while doing this work. We will sometimes feel vulnerable, and this is OK! Being transparent with students about these feelings and involving them in this critical classroom work are crucial to social transformation. However, by not addressing racial injustice, we risk reproducing racial inequality in our classrooms and preparing our youth to be passive and silent bystanders in the face of it. Undoubtedly, silence will not protect Black youth from experiencing racial violence, nor will it prevent mainstream media and other social institutions from constructing damaging narratives about them. For educators who struggle with finding pragmatic ways of working toward racial justice in their classrooms, this article offers hope, tools, and possibilities that are the beginning steps toward racial justice.

> **Even the most well-intentioned educators avoid this topic in their classrooms for fear of misspeaking, sounding racist, not having answers, or causing more harm than help.**

Notes

1. We followed #AssaultAtSpringValley, a hashtag that was used to identify and discuss the assault. Many of the stories that used this hashtag were highly critical of the officer's hostile, racist behavior toward the student.

2. April and Raven.

3. This is not to be confused with religion or dismissive of it.

4. The concept of *dangerous Others* is "constructed in public discourse as the cause, effect, and aberrant response to urban decay. Thus, other social forces and institutions are absolved from any responsibility" (Mahiri, 2004, p. 23).

5. In September 2015, the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus authored a statement that

affirmed that the organization is committed to "providing English Educators with the tools, training, and support needed to build a more equitable system better able to serve the unique needs of all youth."

6. See #fergusonuprising.

7. See #baltimoreuprising.

8. See #keenepumpkinfest.

9. Following the definition of Professor Michael Jefferies (2014), we define anti-blackness as "the debasement of Black humanity, utter indifference, black suffering, and the denial of Black people's right to exist. It captures the erasure of Black Life and a collective refusal to acknowledge the injustice."

10. See the Baltimore Youth Speak Out!! video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ejo0nUnWWLM.

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