Humanities Curricula as White Property

Toward a Reclamation of Black Creative Thought in Social Studies & Literary Curricula

Autumn Griffin & ArCasia James

Introduction

The curricular choices educators make when selecting certain words over others, adding or omitting certain characters, or using a curriculum that tells a story from a certain or single perspective will meaningfully determine which prisms or conceptualizations students cultivate to understand our world. Contortion by elite White male "victors," representations of the dispossessed or the racialized Other, and a concomitant racist, sexist, and classist social order permeate such curricula (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Loewen, 1995).

This problematic scheme reflects a broader project of White supremacy that has historically harmed, and continues to harm, Black students—stunting their capacity to engage with a rigorous humanities curriculum. As two Black women who were former middle school humanities teachers of predominantly Black students, we have witnessed this systemic assault on our students' learning and creative potential.

However, we believe that expressions of Black creative thought, especially in classrooms, inform realizations about Black childhood and adulthood (R. N. Brown, 2013). In this article, we interrogate the harmful, anticritical, Eurocentric nature of humanities curricula and share the classroom strategies we developed and employed to mitigate it. We present the

Autumn Griffin is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. ArCasia James is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, Champaign, Illinois.

line of critical multicultural inquiry we continually pursue for redress.

Furthermore, we thoughtfully, yet unapologetically, examine Black students exclusively in this article. We are aware that doing so might falsely suggest our endorsement of rigid identity politics. However, we want to be clear that "writing about Black people only becomes essentialist when the experiences discussed are taken to portray a uniform Black experience or a universal experience that applies to every other group" (Roberts, 1998, p. 857), which this does not.

Finally, considering the importance of creative thought and how crucial critical thinking is for creativity to effectively transpire, we acknowledge that Black students' classrooms tend to look more like containment facilities rather than places where imagination, creativity, innovation, freedom, and autonomy are practiced (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Irvine, 1999; Lleras, 2008).

Accordingly, we assert that Black students are being intellectually oppressed, and they will not be able to tap into their full creative capacity until educational stakeholders rectify these institutional problems by crafting enriching learning spaces in which Black students' critical creativity can flourish.

Purpose, Significance, and Organization

We aim to connect humanities curricula to Black students' creative thought and clarify the stifling nature of the current relationship between the two. To show this connection, we seek to elucidate how institutional hegemony systematically denies Black students agency and freedom since anti-Black racism is the fulcrum of White supremacy (Dumas & ross, 2016;

Nakagawa, 2012). To further this point, our conceptual orientation emphasizes that White ownership of humanities curricula upholds White domination.

We have focused on the humanities curricula because the complexities of the human condition are explored in the humanities, meaningfully shaping the perspectives, assumptions, and epistemologies students will grow into and use to interpret and navigate society; thus the distinct and severe consequences of studying the humanities warrant careful, critical scrutiny.

This article represents our response to the gaping holes that exist between academic scholarship and practice-based work for educators. We blend theory and experience to describe our attempts to strategically engage, confront, and correct harmful ideologies in curricula to move toward reclaiming humanities curricula for the purposes of Black creative thought.

The personal anecdotes we present may serve as adaptable models for practitioners to contest Black ideological oppression in education. To complete this task, we have adapted the concept of educational property rights from Cheryl Harris's (1993) theoretical article "Whiteness as Property," a conceptualization also found in more recent scholarship (Donnor, 2013; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Patel, 2015) that has meaningfully extended and applied Harris's theory to underscore issues of educational injustice. Our analysis adds to this growing body of scholarship and is distinct in its focus on K–12 humanities curricula and Black students.

In our theoretical framework, which mainly draws from Harris's "Whiteness as Property" and Dumas and ross's (2016) *Black Critical Theory* (BlackCrit), we conceptualize schools as *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs; Althusser, 1970). It is through this lens that we discuss curricula as White

property. Next, we review the literature on K–12 social studies and literacy curricula, highlighting the corruptive prevalence of Eurocentrism and anticritical thinking. In this process, we interrogate and expose the intricacies of humanities curricula as White property and offer provisional approaches rooted in critical multiculturalism. To conclude, we briefly underline relevant issues and close with implications.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework draws primarily from Harris's (1993) and Dumas and ross's (2016) theorizations of subjugation. Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) helps to make White supremacy and proprietary practices understandable within the educational enterprise and demonstrates how historical hegemonic ownership fosters subpar learning outcomes for marginalized, underserved students. BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016) provides a way to examine Black students' intellectual livelihood in its own right by engaging theories of Blackness and anti-Blackness characteristic of U.S. institutions.

In this context, schools play significant roles as ISAs in reproducing social and ideological conditions that maintain White supremacy. These forces play out lucidly in school curricula, where ideological domination occurs. The strategies we cultivated to challenge this oppression in our own classrooms were built on tenets of critical multiculturalism (May, 1999; May & Sleeter, 2010).

In "Whiteness as Property," legal scholar and critical race theorist Harris (1993) analyzed how possession of Whiteness has given and continues to give Whites in the U.S. privileges in exchange for Black humanity. Recasting Whiteness as a functional form of property demystifies why Whites continue to practice the "absolute right to exclude" by defining and constructing White racial identity "in ways that increased its value by reinforcing its exclusivity" and their reasons for "premis[ing Whiteness] on White supremacy rather than mere difference" (pp. 1736–1737).

Antebellum laws outlawing literacy for enslaved persons in the United States are but one historical example of these exclusionary practices (Anderson, 1988; Harris, 1993). This point underlines what is at stake when Black students are systematically subjected to curricula centrally premised on Whiteness, an exclusive, highly valued identity they cannot attain.

Harris (1993) went on to note that

"Whiteness [became] the embodiment of White privilege [and] transcended mere belief or preference [by becoming] usable property" (p. 1734). We situate education in general, and humanities curricula in particular, as usable property, which serves a White supremacist, anti-Black agenda. This concept, along with Althusser's (1970) notion of ISAs, highlights the pervasive, ideological ramifications of standardized humanities curricula on all students, while Dumas and ross's (2016) BlackCrit in education helps explain the specific severity of these consequences for Black students.

This conceptualization is in itself an urgent matter, because research (Anderson & Dixson, 2016; Anyon, 1978; Apple, 1993; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Donnor, 2013; Giroux, 1978, 1983) has shown that education for critical consciousness and critical thinking remains largely inaccessible or unavailable to Black students. This means that the students most affected are provided the poorest tools to effectively challenge their oppression.

As the controlling group in U.S. society, White people possess an acute investment in Whiteness that would risk bankruptcy if equity and justice were to manifest (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006). Accordingly, White domination remains distinct, as it thrives on an anti-Black and White supremacist logic that relies on the subordination of Black people (Dumas & ross, 2016; Harris, 1993; Roberts, 1998).

Because Whiteness is greater than its physical indicators, it is integral to consider the dispositions, assumptions, and epistemologies that come with White racial identity and how they protect and strengthen instruments of oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Feagin, 2000; Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006), such as curricula. Therefore White ownership of humanities curricula covertly facilitates and sustains the material status quo by training students uncritically to accept the prevailing systems that keep Whites in power (Althusser, 1970; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Donnor, 2013; Patel, 2015).

We choose to interrogate schools because classrooms are locations where knowledge, and thus power, is re/produced, assembled, and allocated (Fernández, 2002; Juarez & Hayes, 2012 ; Ladson-Billings, 1998); as such, power's misdistribution can begin to be disrupted there, too.

Literature Review

Social Studies Curricula

Social studies refers to the "study of

human enterprise across space and time" (ross, 2001, p. 4) and tends to explore controversial topics, including social justice. An ideological battleground, social studies curricula often invite widespread academic and popular scrutiny (K. D. Brown & Brown, 2010; King, 2014a, 2014b; King, Crowley, & Brown, 2010). Scholars have already identified and problematized the false objectivity and Eurocentrism permeating K–12 social studies curricula (Anyon, 1979; Apple, 1993; Asante, 1991; Kumashiro, 2001; Paxton, 1999). They have illuminated how schools systemically cloak and normalize the subjugation of their most marginalized, underserved students and how guiding ideals of meritocracy and color-blindness hinder Black students from achieving academic success (Anderson & Dixson, 2016; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; DeCuir & Dixson, 2005).

Harris (1993) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) highlighted how Whiteness is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation, underscoring the particularly perilous plight Black students face within institutions designed to disparage and surreptitiously marginalize them. Although race is not the sole social identity salient for examining or predicting one's access to high-quality humanities curricula, because gender, class, sexuality, and ability play vital roles too, race has determined, and continues to meaningfully determine, educational outcomes and social mobility (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Feagin, 2000).

Because social studies curricula expressly supports meritocracy and color-blindness through content that endorses historical distortion, American exceptionalism, blind patriotism, and capitalism's glorification, racial exclusion and subjugation remain difficult to detect and therefore combat (Anderson & Dixson, 2016; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Loewen, 1995; Ross, 2001 ; Urrieta, 2005; M. B. Zinn, 1980). Moreover, K–12 curricula normalize and privilege Whiteness and, as a result, afford Whites access to higher quality educational resources (Swartz, 1992). Therefore the anti-Black logic around which social studies operates has negative consequences for Black students (Dumas & ross, 2016).

Racial exclusion in social studies seeks to preserve and normalize hegemony, White supremacy, classism, and sexism and to work against critical thinking, which is a prerequisite for innovation and creativity (King, 2014 ; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Swartz, 1992; Urrieta, 2005). To pose problems, work toward critical

consciousness, and dismantle systems of oppression, students must be able to co-construct knowledge in their school communities (Delpit, 1988; Freire, 1970, 1998; Giroux, 1992 ; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Woodson, 1933/2000). These learning objectives are especially integral for Black students who are overwhelmingly located at the bottom of the social hierarchy, which is further stratified by students' intersectional identities (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Collins, 2001; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Feagin, 2000; hooks, 1994).

Predicated on mundane pedagogical practices, such as memorizing disconnected facts and standardized exam preparation, social studies in K–12 schools is a special site of curricular struggle for Black students because it is a place where ideologies of domination and subservience thrive (A. L. Brown & Brown, 2010; Giroux, 1978, 1983; King, 2014a, 2014b; Loewen, 1995; Ross, 2001). Ineffectual social studies methods and biased content work against critical thinking, which is particularly essential for educators to impart in schools serving Black students (King, 2014b; Loewen, 1995; Ross, 2001). Black students must be supported by educators to develop an awareness of the conditions responsible for their plights so they can plan effective responses (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Despite its shortcomings, social studies has the potential to assist in the reclamation project of Black creativity given its aptness for investigating the human condition, pinpointing social injustice, and constructing solutions to achieve justice. Therefore, critical, culturally responsive multiculturalism can serve as an effective tool for cultivating Black creative thought (King, 2014b; King & Chandler, 2016; Leistyna, 2002; Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012; Swartz, 1992). Yet, despite their promise, these strategies cannot and will not bring about the overall institutional redress necessary for the end of oppression.

Literacy Curricula

As with standardized social studies curricula, not only do standardized literacy curricula falsely presuppose homogenized student backgrounds (Milner, 2012) but they also work to dissuade critical thinking and normalize Whiteness in the minds of Black students. Although literacy scholarship has largely suggested that "old ways" of teaching grammar—including methods such as diagramming sentences and memorizing parts of speech—are not effective for any students, many schools, especially those where Black students attend in high

numbers and where teachers are largely young, White, and underqualified, emphasize precisely this type of instruction (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1984; Navarre Cleary, 2014).[1] Similarly, standardized literacy curricula presuppose interpretations of texts that rely on White, middle-class ways of knowing. Black students are often expected to regurgitate responses to texts and are discouraged from articulating any critical readings or interpretations (DeBlase, 2003).

Furthermore, many standardized literacy curricula emphasize canonical literature, which is largely the work of White men. Such narratives reify the privilege and preservation of narratives told by middle-class, cis-White men, disallow Black children the opportunity to make connections to the texts they read, and discourage positive identity development (Strauss, 2014). Although such texts can teach us much about the history of this country from a particular standpoint, a lack of variation in narratives quells any critical thought that might encourage discourse about America's history of oppression and marginalization, reinforcing notions of White supremacy in the minds of both Black and White students.

Moreover, this type of exclusion from curriculum covertly teaches Black students that their culture, experiences, and voices are not valued. Arguments for the continued exclusion of texts written by authors of different races include, but are not limited to, fear that parents will not want their children to engage with the inappropriate content these texts might include (Godina, 1996) and suggestions that such texts are not rigorous enough or are considered "trash" literature (Gibson, 2010), again reinforcing the devaluing of Black people and narratives.

A cousin to *exclusion* within literacy curriculum is *misrepresentation*. Although White men dominate traditional canonical literature, a few narratives not written by White men have been tokenized and taught in isolation in ways that perpetuate Black stereotypes and misrepresent student experiences. For instance, two popular novels taught in schools are *Black Boy* by Richard Wright (1945/1998) and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952/1995; Applebee, 1989). Although both are classics of their own merit, when taught in isolation or by a teacher who may not be a critical literature pedagogue (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014), these texts can work to perpetuate the stereotype of

the "angry Black man" without any interrogation of how systems of oppression shape the characters' lived experiences (Godina, 1996). Furthermore, such limited representations and tokenized additions of Black literature restrict Black students' ability to see representations of their own nuanced Black experience.

The use of standardized literacy curricula as White property works to stifle Black students' minds and silence their voices, effectively restricting creative thought. By directing students' attention away from literature with experiences representative of their own and toward grammar and "correctness" as the ultimate goals of English instruction, literacy curricula fail to assist students in developing the necessary tools to facilitate meaningful learning.

Recap

Our review of the literature revealed a substantive academic understanding of the harm curricula do to Black students. However, a dearth of literature has explored the consequences of White property as enacted in schools' prescribed K–12 humanities curricula for Black students. The literature has yet to fully explore Black creative thought and the curricular constraints it is under in U.S. schools. This article seeks to reduce this gap in scholarship and push thinking toward the ways in which White supremacy impairs Black students' quests to engage the humanities and their creative capacity.

Navigating Contested Terrain

ArCasia's Narrative

Coming from a progressive social studies teacher training program in the South, my orientation to teaching and curricula was especially peculiar. I trained to approach education skeptically, preparing cautiously for the curricular redesign I knew I would encounter upon beginning my career.

Inundated with betrayal during my undergraduate African American history courses, I aspired to craft my practice to account for the glaring omissions and historical distortions characteristic of my own educational experience. This revelation incited terror in me when I thought about the depths of my miseducation and what that meant for all others afflicted. My goal, then, was to do my absolute best to ensure that my own students did not have to navigate the same deceit. This view primarily shaped my journey as a sixth-grade social studies teacher at an all-boys charter school in the Northeast. In my time there,

of the nearly 200 students I taught, one was White and four were Latino, making the vast majority Black.

Also of import was my school's primary concern with skill building and exam scores. Though my school offered prescribed curricula, I enjoyed autonomy in selecting materials that would produce in my students the same sets of skills and competencies they would need for English language arts. Furthermore, my school did not view social studies as a core subject, yielding mathematics, English, or science more integral.

Both troubling and empowering, this lack of scrutiny afforded me a greater level of freedom than core-subject teachers enjoyed; however, I regularly consulted national and local standards to ensure that my students were being equipped with what they needed and deserved. Expectations guiding my performance were often measured based on how effectively I supported the English teachers by training our students to read and write proficiently. Fortunately, my pedagogical objectives aligned with those of any critical, social justice-oriented educator and emphasized critical reading, writing, and thinking skills that serve any academic endeavor.

My initial goal was to encourage my students to grow critical of any information given them, specifically that seeking to preserve hegemony. During my first year of teaching, I was consumed with figuring out what it meant to teach, which left little time for pushing back on oppression via creative, subversive curricular adaptations. Accordingly, one of my first decisions in my second year forced me to set my anxiety aside and develop exercises that prompted my students to cultivate a deep understanding of systems of power.

For my first vignette, James Loewen (1995), Carter G. Woodson (1933/2000), and Howard Zinn (1980) inspired me to show, rather than tell, my students the perverse misrepresentations in their textbooks. Because our school lacked both a library and textbooks, I secured my own text and copied pages from its beginning chapter describing the Spanish Crown's attempt to find a faster route to the Indies (Loewen, 1995). Traditionally, many textbooks depict this fateful encounter from the perspective of Italian-born Columbus, noting his fleet's valiant discovery and civilization of the area's natives. This sentimental portrayal is precisely how the standard textbook I selected framed the event. In discussion with my students, I posed questions that required them to label the key figures in

the text, identify the prevailing perspective, and ascertain lessons purported about Westerners' capabilities and those suggested about the abilities of the besieged indigenous communities.

Next, I used excerpts from Zinn (1980) to illustrate the same set of events, raising the same questions. Without much persuasion, my students started to formulate conclusions about the intent of the standard textbook's account. They started questioning which report was the "right" one and how they were supposed to know. As sixth graders, they were even more animated than usual in their growing consensus that, maybe, Columbus was really a bad guy who incited terror on the native groups he ravaged. The class discussions that ensued probed authorial intent, master-narrative construction, historical perspectives, and power distribution. We explored the aims of textbook writers and that of Zinn himself. Too, we dissected source credibility and the use of primary and secondary sources, and we speculated what any descendants of Arawak and Taino groups might deserve should they remain today.

Beginning the year this way enabled my students and I to constantly ask these questions as we learned. The wide reach of their healthy skepticism buttressed their critical thinking, which permeated our learning throughout the year. There were scant lessons wherein students did not demand to know more about the sources authors used to construct the historical "facts" we were studying and the reliability of said material. In fact, during the Columbus lesson, students independently assessed their education retrospectively, wondering aloud to what extent information they had been given before was valid according to their new standards.

This activity opened up possibilities for my students to reclaim the social studies curriculum intended for them by using it to expose the shortcomings of history and historiography. We weighed historical acts in ways conventionally discouraged, a tall feat for any group of sixth-grade boys. It was also through this exercise that I was able to witness their potential for creative thought swell, as they explored the various ways in which history as they knew it might be "wrong" and thus speculate variations of the past that had been lost, erased, or modified.

My second vignette describes my efforts to accentuate the global epistemologies and achievements of populations of Color before the proliferation of White supremacy. I taught Ancient Civilizations, which

excited me, as I saw it as an opportunity to supplant Eurocentrism by normalizing and centering populations of Color. It was expressly this approach that guided my scope and sequence construction. At the outset, I shared with my students my explicit plans to expose the historical fragility of Eurocentrism.

As we progressed, we took time to highlight ways in which Europeans have learned directly from peoples who would not today be considered White. Units included a focus on Egypt, Nubia, Mesopotamia, ancient China, and lands inhabited by the Maya, Aztec, and Inca. I admitted early on and regularly reminded my students that we were expected to learn about ancient Greece and Rome, but that I planned to leave them for the end and, should we run out of time, that subsequent teachers were far more likely to cover those topics than the ones we were investigating.

I also emphasized that many of the accomplishments to be studied within ancient Greece and Rome were strongly tied to features of groups and places we would be sure to explore. I shared that once they encountered Western ancient civilizations, they would have a wealth of knowledge to draw on in making connections to groups of Color that had accomplished many of the same achievements.

Challenging Eurocentrism in this way with my students enabled them to reimagine the world beyond Whiteness as a hegemonic principle. Assumptions about all great achievements being produced by White men were disrupted and, in some cases, shattered. Although social studies standards guided much of my teaching, I worked within and around them to actively struggle against the miseducation the humanities curricula as White property intended to impart in them. I witnessed their creative thought flourish in the repositioning of people of Color as complex, dynamic, and autonomous.

Though admittedly imperfect, these two examples showcase my pedagogical framework, which meaningfully influenced my classroom practices. I stressed the importance of ending lessons with more questions than answers and modeled how to raise questions about the past by troubling the master-narrative. Educators teaching for social justice might similarly attend to the suppressed creativity of Black students in this way.

Undergirding most of my classroom strategies was a critical multiculturalism that tried to dissociate their education from White property while maintaining

an acute awareness of society's hegemonic expectations. I aspired to build on the assets with which my students arrived, purposefully legitimizing their worldviews in our quest to unlearn anti-Blackness and White supremacy, imagine social justice, and practice treating one another in a fully dignified, humanizing way.

Autumn's Narrative

During my undergraduate career, I began to discover shortcomings in my own education—the lack of exposure to texts, ideas, voices, and experiences similar to my own and the other Black students I grew up with. My college education made me skeptical of any curriculum that remained unwaveringly loyal to traditional canonical texts and standardized approaches to teaching and learning. My goal in becoming a practitioner was to account for the exclusion of counterstories and suppressed narratives to make literacy an agent of empowerment rather than disenfranchisement in a way my earlier education had not.

This desire worked as the foundation for my tenure as a middle school reading/English language arts teacher at a charter school in the Southeast. With the exception of one Asian student, one Latina student, and two first-generation West African students, all of my students (189 in total) identified as Black/African American.

Because the school was in its first year of operation upon my arrival, my principal's primary concern was meeting benchmarks on the state exam students would take at the end of the year. Though he did not demand we use a prescribed curriculum, textbooks were made available for use as we created our unit plans and student materials. Because I did not receive any formal teacher training to prepare me for my work as an educator, I entered the profession with little orientation to teaching or any specific pedagogical framework.

However, after consulting with several veteran teachers whose pedagogical instincts I trusted, I learned that the best educators strike the balance between utilizing standards (in this case, Common Core) and emphasizing critical literacy skills to create a curriculum that both endows students with the skills they need and incorporates knowledge to which they are entitled (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). I set out to create a curriculum that would engage students in the practice of reading and discourse, build their skills as readers, and facilitate creative and critical thought about texts they read and events about which they read.

To accomplish such a task, I met with the social studies teacher to learn what major events students would focus on throughout the year. I learned that my students were to learn about America's role in "ending" World War II and the Holocaust. I copied excerpts from Wiesel's (2012) *Night* as well as texts about America's complicity in the war.

I asked my students questions that required them to think about how Wiesel and Wiesel's narrative may have differed from what they read in social studies class. They acknowledged that both accounts detailed the Holocaust as a horrendous event but began to raise questions about the varying depictions of America. We talked at length about the point of view of the author and the effect of power on shaping a generally accepted narrative.

We conducted a similar activity with the text *Under the Blood-Red Sun* (Salisbury, 2005), a story about a young Japanese American boy who lived in Hawai'i during the 1941 Pearl Harbor attacks. After having already learned about World War II and America's involvement, my students were eager to read another counterstory. This time they questioned Japanese motivations for the attack as well as the treatment of Japanese Americans after the attack. They were baffled at the American government's use of internment camps and became increasingly skeptical of the "land of the free" narrative.

Finally, I charged my students with writing an essay in which they analyzed the various accounts of the war and America's role in it. The assignment allowed them the opportunity to articulate the importance of multiple narratives and analyze each individually. Students determined that America did not play the heroic role that is often portrayed in history books and movies recounting the events. They raised questions about how America could have both committed such atrocities and been complicit in such suffering and about why such narratives are often brushed aside.

Throughout the unit, I observed my students grow not only in their capacity to think critically and creatively about information given them but also in their reading and writing abilities. As they revised one another's papers, they thought carefully about how they could use language to most effectively argue their points in a way that compelled the reader both intellectually and emotionally. They offered critiques of each other's work and challenged one another to find ways of using both their authentic voices and complex academic vocabulary and sentence structure (Atwell, 1987).

Engaging in this type of skepticism, questioning, and discourse with my students early on laid the foundation for a series of lessons that hit closer to home in my third year with the same group. After the release of the grand jury report in the case of Mike Brown, my students began to raise more questions. This particular group of students had not only watched social media explode at the death of Trayvon Martin two years prior but also had now seen video clips about the deaths of Eric Garner and Tamir Rice.

To challenge my students to think critically about the larger implications of the case, I began the month-long unit of an exploration of the grand jury report in the case of Mike Brown. I jigsawed the report for my students, and they examined different sections of the case (Beers, 2003). They worked in groups to explore diagrams, re-create the scene, read witness statements, and think critically about the makeup of the jury. After several discussions about the verdict of the case and what they believed the verdict should have been, my students started to ask even more questions. They wanted to know whether this was the first time in history this type of police brutality had happened to Black people. A couple of them were able to rattle off the names Emmett Till and Rodney King, but few knew any names beyond those.

In response to such curiosity, I created lessons in which students used technology to work in pairs as they explored past deaths of Black women and men and read story after story about court cases where the killers walked away without conviction. After the exploration, my students participated in a *chalk talk* to allow them time and space to process their thoughts. They worked in pairs to write one statement that summarized their thoughts after learning of the deaths. Each pair wrote their statement boldly in the center of a single piece of paper, and students hung the statements around the room. Students then walked around the room silently, read each other's statements, and commented where they felt moved to do so.

Perhaps what I loved most about this writing activity was that my students were not given a prompt, a length requirement, or a rubric, and they still engaged with multiple texts in creative ways by contextualizing the works they had read, posing their own questions and responding thoughtfully; the assignment afforded students creative expression free from the typical constraints

of traditional writing assignments. I would even argue that in many ways, this creative instructional activity offered me more insight into my students' thought processes and ability to comprehend than any other assignment ever has.

Throughout the years, my students came to challenge any narrative that diminished the voices or experiences of any marginalized people and grew a healthy skepticism of any text that centered a White-dominant narrative. Perhaps most importantly, they learned the power of their own voices and literacy skills. They began to demonstrate an understanding of the power in writing and sharing their own stories and in using their pens and their voices to challenge anyone willing to attempt to diminish that power. My pedagogical practice was by no means perfect. However, these stories provide glimpses into my classroom and examples of the pedagogical frameworks I used to encourage creative and critical thinking that would reclaim literacy for Black students through multicultural education.

Discussion

Both of our narratives demonstrate how our classrooms served as spaces for the production of creative thought (Freire, 1998). Our students were encouraged to generate questions relevant to the content and their lives as well as to seek answers to those questions themselves. Rather than being passive consumers of knowledge, our students dissected materials and read the world around them (Freire & Macedo, 2005) in an effort to find truths.

As instructors, we began with the integral step of working to understand the racial and economic contexts of our schools, including the assets our students brought with them to the classroom (Delpit, 2006 ; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). From there, we presented students with multiple narratives of a single story, which led to an environment where students felt empowered to ask questions and challenge information given them.

Choosing collaboration over power, we served as facilitators of learning experiences rather than as sole knowledge bearers, effectively creating opportunities for students to grow with one another academically. By deemphasizing standardized forms of assessment typically claimed as White property and centering discourse and other nontraditional learning experiences, we presented students with the tools to take

claim of their own growth as critical thinkers and thus develop the critical thinking skills necessary to yield academic achievement *and* transform their circumstances (if that is what they so chose).

Much of the traditional curriculum Black students receive in schools denies them any opportunity to explore truths that do not center Whiteness. For us, humanities curricula should challenge this exact framework. The humanities play a vital part in molding students' expectations of themselves and society through investigations of human behavior over time. Since "schooling [is] a site in which Whites exercise their absolute right to exclude Black children" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 416; see also Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the interrogation of human behavior and interactions in humanities classrooms helps clarify the danger of the continuation of such behavior for Black students (a distinct difference from the purpose of a STE[A]M curriculum).

As such, it is in humanities classrooms where students should be taught the skills that encourage questioning of the master-narrative and creative approaches to solving problems and finding truths. All students, and in particular Black students, should be introduced to the magnificent and monumental contributions of Black people and people of Color throughout American history in ways that allow them to explore complex nuances. Furthermore, their own literacies should not be used in ways that make Black students feel inadequate but rather should be leveraged to facilitate the discovery of their authentic and beautiful voices.

Implications and Conclusion

It is important to note that our success in reclaiming humanities curricula was largely due to our orientation as critical multicultural pedagogues. Banks (1993) posited that for any multicultural education to be successfully implemented, changes must be made not only to curricula but also to teaching materials, teaching and learning styles, attitudes and perceptions of teachers, and the goals and norms of schools.

Although we sought to overturn the use of standardized curricula in our own classrooms in an effort to reclaim humanities curricula, upending curricula alone was not sufficient; the stronghold of Whiteness in this country is too pervasive to treat the curricular aspect of teaching and learning in isolation.

Strong multicultural curricula will

falter in the hands of teachers who inflict racial violence through a lack of socioemotional awareness, racial literacy, and rigid school culture. Future research should seek to understand how teachers of Black students can overcome disempowering attitudes and perceptions as well as problematic school culture to successfully implement multicultural curricula in their classrooms.

We hope these reflections will serve as examples of useful approaches toward a humanizing pedagogy in the educational quest to repay a small portion of the education debt owed to Black American students (Bartolome, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, we firmly acknowledge that no teaching strategy or pedagogical technique will do the work necessary to bring about complete social justice and equity; nothing we have recommended is a panacea.

The reclaiming of Black creative thought in humanities curricula has perhaps never been more necessary for the educators of Black children as it is now. We have replied to the troubling holes in scholarship between academic and practice-based work, hoping to highlight the need for future research in the immediate future.

Bringing the institution of education closer to the collective, collaborative, creative enterprise it ought to be will never be easy, but if we are to effectively combat Whites' property ownership of humanities curricula, we must dismantle the anti-Blackness that sustains it, thus empowering our Black students to flourish as they deserve.

Acknowledgment

Note

[1] This is not to suggest that reading comprehension and other foundational literacy skills are not important for the literacy development of Black students. However, overemphasis of such practices often comes at the expense of deeper readings of Black students' written responses and fails to accentuate their highly critical, deeply reflective, and profoundly insightful ways of knowing the world.

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