Black lives mattering in and out of schools

Anti-Black racism, racial violence, and a hope for Black imagination in educational research

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Introduction

Black haunting is ever present in the United States. It permeates with ongoing police brutality, the endemic nature of anti-Black racism, and the ceaseless racially violent curricula, pedagogies, and teachers found in K-12 schools predominant with Black children. From the Gullah Sea Islands of South Carolina (e.g., Walter Scott, Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson) to the concrete jungles of New York City (e.g., Eleanor Bumpurs and Eric Garner) to the windy city of Chicago (e.g., Rekia Boyd, Laquan McDonald, and Paul O’Neal) and to the hills and Bay Area of California (e.g., Tyisha Miller and Oscar Grant), the murders of Black people are constant reminders of the dangers of anti-Black racism and racial violence – otherwise Black haunting – which we, as educators, must teach and empower against. These violent Black hauntings not only run rampant outside of schools, sadly they also run rampant inside the proclaimed “safety” within schools, particularly through the literary canon, English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, and literacy educational research. Traditional research practices, the literary canon, and state-sanctioned curriculum police confine and haunt the lives of Black children, youth, and adults in ways that do not murder their beings (like those aforementioned) but nonetheless spirit murder (Love, 2019) their souls.

To illustrate, as a former secondary English teacher, the genesis of who I (Lamar) am as a language and literacy scholar transpires from my experiences from working with and learning from Black youth. During my first year of K-12 teaching, George Zimmerman, a white male neighborhood watchman, killed Trayvon Martin, a Black male youth, in Sanford, Florida. The murder became a national phenomenon when Zimmerman successfully used Black male racial stereotypes to justify his actions in court. Here, Zimmerman engaged the white imagination (Morrison, 1992; Steinberg, 2020) which is often scripted and utilized as ideological thoughts and actions that are shaped around white logic, whiteness, patriarchy, and violence (i.e., physical, symbolic, linguistic, and curricular and pedagogical violence) that does harm to
Black youth and Black people. Steinberg (2020) writes that “The white imagination is a powerful tool, it is the manifestation of white supremacy within white and no-white minds everywhere.”

Embodying the white imagination is the reason why Trayvon Martin was racially profiled and shot senselessly by George Zimmerman and then not given justice by a predominantly white jury for the murder. That Monday following Trayvon’s death, I witnessed 14- and 15-year-old Black youth wrestle with the misperceptions, stereotypes, and racial violence that are inflicted upon Black lives. I witnessed Black youth problematize the relationship between how Black lives are positioned in and out of school, prompting me to meditate on how language and literacy studies and English education are implicated in the racial violence that unfolds within-school spaces and outside-of-school contexts.

It is no surprise that anti-Black racism is embedded within the English language. Namely, that Zimmerman can use the English language that he learned in schools to justify his murder of a Black teenager outside of schools is exactly the gravity of my position. To be clear, ELA classrooms are saturated with white supremacist and racist undertones. In the case of Trayvon Martin, Zimmerman used terms and phrases like “suspicious,” “Black,” “wearing a hoodie” to frame Trayvon as a threat to the dispatch officer. He continues with language that frames Black men as dangerous, violent, and disposable in the same ways they are so often portrayed in canonical text used in ELA classrooms like Huckleberry Finn or To Kill a Mockingbird. In fact, as a Black male myself, I too experience anti-Black racism and violence which has informed my teaching. Indeed as a Black male English Language Arts (ELA) teacher I operationally choose to reconceptualize how anti-Black racism and violence seep into the classroom and educational research in ways that do not make race invisible. Instead, I developed a racial justice framework to be applied to ELA and classroom teaching; otherwise, Critical Race English Education (CREE). This chapter delves into what is CREE and how it can be used as a method to thwart the Black haunting and its anti-Black violence.

Presenting Critical Race English Education (CREE)

CREE as pedagogy and theory

To counteract the racial violence that ensues within K-12 English and ELA classrooms and within educational research writ large, we, the authors, encourage teachers to build upon perspectives that specifically shed light on the stories, history, and knowledge of Black people. Thus, CREE is not just a theory to center Blackness in the literary canon, but in doing so, it is also a method for how to center Blackness in theoretical education research. In doing so, CREE addresses the complex intersections of anti-Black racism, Blackness, whiteness, language, and literacy, which ultimately aims to deconstruct the white literary canon (Morrison, 1992). For example, unlike the traditional canon that focuses
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on white heroism, CREE stems from an epistemological framework that heralds Black accomplishments. Additionally, CREE influences how language and literacy scholars conduct research, drives what theories and frameworks are utilized, and informs teachers’ pedagogical ideologies and practices. For example, white literary texts such as The Old Man and the Sea, Lord of the Flies, Romeo and Juliet, and To Kill A Mockingbird center American exceptionalism, white innocence, and anti-Black racism and violence. By not adhering to these canonical literary texts, educators informed by CREE can present new texts grounded in Blackness. Contrary to resistant discourse, this can be done in PK-12 classrooms. For me, (Courtney) it was imperative that as an elementary school teacher I challenged my students to question the curriculum placed in front of them as well as the literary texts made available by our school. So often, if my students did see Blackness reflected in our school library or their guided readers, the characters were portrayed as tricksters, in need of saving, or impoverished. It was not only my responsibility to teach them the tools to critique these texts but also to present them with books where they saw themselves as thriving, happy and whole people.

CREE as methods

The application of theoretical methods that are grounded in positivist paradigms often depersonalizes Black communities, propels a racially stratified society, perpetuates objectivity white rationality, and silences the lived realities and voices of LGBTQAI+ communities (Johnson, 2018). This is done because oftentimes empirical researchers arrive at their research with dominant ideologies like that of whiteness. However, unlike these methods, CREE as a method draws from Blackness because it’s dynamic and exists along multiple dimensions. Considering this, Blackness moves beyond race and encompasses other interlocking identities such as ability, religion, citizenship, and gender and sexuality. To that end, using CREE as a method better humanizes the Black experience. For example, Gordon (2011) wrestles with haunting alongside concepts like dispossession, exploitation, and racial capitalism, all of which entangle with Blackness. Noting that haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed (p. 2), she explains that haunting, however, is usually produced by these experiences. As such, the reckoning that haunting emerges from these instances helps us to confront what must be done when encountering anti-Black racism, whiteness, and the white imagination in classrooms, society, and research. This process is also a part of engaging in CREE methods.

Through CREE, we are better equipped to develop future educational researchers and to ground them in the authentic understandings of Black history, memory, and knowledge. If Black lives are to matter in theoretical educational research, then researchers must embrace new theories and methods that prioritize Blackness and depart from traditional qualitative measures that inherently embed whiteness, and anti-Black racism. Milner (2007) corroborates this, reminding us that “Some education researchers have given privileged status to
dominant, white voices, beliefs, ideologies, and view over the voices of people of color” (p. 389). Avoiding this, the CREE method centers Blackness, a necessary step to stop anti-Black racism in educational research.

Ideenological parameters to CREE

White imagination

Circling back to the white imagination, the white imagination exists within what Morrison (1992) calls the white literary imagination. The white literary imagination specifically speaks to literary studies and literacy educational researchers; more specifically, Morrison (1992) explicates that white literature, authors, research practices, writing theories and methods, and language are all deeply entrenched in white ideologies and white supremacist patriarchy. Focusing on the white literary canon and literacy research practices protect whiteness and white ways of living and being in the world while policing and controlling what can and cannot be researched, read, critiqued, and challenged. It is of no surprise then that the white literary canon and white literacy research benefit white people and dehumanize Black people because whiteness continues to go unnamed and unchecked (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017) in schools and society. The white literary imagination is the reason why many Black youth disengage with commonly used white literary texts that focus on white characters, stories, authors, and language. It also sustains traditional research and positivistic paradigms which are continuously applied in literacy education research by continuing to portray Black students as subjects to be studied rather than humanized and empowered if they take center stage at all. However, there are extensive amounts of scholarship that challenge these traditional and positivistic approaches to qualitative research (Johnson, 2018). Johnson (2018), for example, argues that

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.

However, to disentangle with the white imagination in research methods, researchers must take an active step to center Blackness, an underlying condition of applying CREE as method.

Black radical imagination

As stated earlier, the white imagination and the white literary imagination lead to anti-Black racism and violence because they view Blackness as
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anti-intellectual, sinister, and non-human. The humanity, brilliance, and beauty of Black people and culture do not exist within the white imagination or the white literary imagination. On the contrary, historically and contemporarily, Black folks have pushed back against all forms of oppression, marginalization, and violence, as a way to knock down and eradicate our current conditions while creating and building the world we deserve and demand. Through the Black gaze and experience, the Black radical imagination centers Blackness, Black lives, Black humanity, and Black futurity. Historically, our ancestors who encountered enslavement demonstrated what it means to revolt and overturn an endemic system that polices, surveils, and oppresses Black life. Our ancestors and elders practiced and embodied what Kelley (2002) calls freedom dreaming. He contends,

without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.

(p. xii)

In like manner, Love (2019) argues that freedom dreaming and the Black radical imagination are powerful tools that help Black folks to fight against injustice. In harmony with scholars such as Kelley, (2002), Love (2019), and Stovall (2017, 2018), operating from the Black radical imagination requires the exploration of how our past, present, and future intersects and are constantly in complicated conversations with one another. Our past and current condition of anti-Black violence, misogynoir, xenophobia, and anti-immigration continue to haunt Black people; therefore, understanding our past and current conditions enable us to read, study, and analyze social life (Gordon, 1997). Embodying the Black radical imagination provides us with the tools to understand the structure of feeling a reality we have come to experience.

The Black radical imagination and haunting go hand-in-hand. To be clear, as Black folks navigating multiple spaces such as the academy, the classroom, and the overall institution, we understand how our racial hauntings are deeply etched within our lives, and we carry them into our research, teaching, service, and outreach. As such, we lean on and build upon the Black radical imagination because, ideologically, it can not only lead us to a critical understanding of our past, present, and future but also provide us with an opportunity and space to move towards the liberation of these hauntings. Because haunting functions as an ideological framing that allows us to capture how the past shapes the present and how the past and present structure the possibilities of the future, we name that haunting creates space for the Black radical imagination to take form. Within the Black radical imagination, Black people are holders and producers of knowledge, and knowledge is not presented through a westernized lens that reflects white standards and onto-epistemologies which are often neutral, objective, non-emotional, and non-personal (Baszile, 2006).
Since CREE method draws from this ideological stance it then becomes a formidable method to stop the haunting of Black people and, in this case, for Black students.

**Black lives mattering in PK-12 ELA classrooms**

Despite centuries of anti-Black racism, there is something about today’s intense anti-Black racism and police brutality that cuts Black youth so deeply today. The resemblance of past and present trauma and violence are noteworthy; however, even more noteworthy is how Black youth are responding to these racial traumas. These Black hauntings evoke emotionality and trigger traumas due in part because racism and white supremacy continue to manifest, especially with respect to today’s return to blatant anti-Black racism and violence. Because Matias and Newlove (2017) argue that the Trump presidency led to a return to emboldened whiteness, the enactments of anti-Black racism and racial violence are not only virally displayed in social media, sadly some whites enjoy mocking it (see #georgefloydchallenge). As such, Black youth are severely triggered and emotionally traumatized in ways unknown before. This new emotional condition is brought into the classroom because it unearths Black youth’s racial reality. Thus, when exposed to eurocentric literature Black students cannot withstand any more racial assaults that ignore their humanity – sadly whiteness in the literary canon is just that. As such, educational researchers have to understand that our research, theory, and pedagogy intersect with racial reality and cannot be divorced from that racial reality. CREE researchers must bear in mind the racial text of Black students, recognizing that they bring in a racial reality wrought with trauma, haunting, and emotional depression. This text for Black youth must be read and not ignored.

**CREE in English education: an application**

As such, educators and researchers have to grapple with how anti-Black violence and white supremacy are omnipresent in research, in classrooms, and in the curricula. The anti-Black violence and racism that erupt in educational research and school classrooms are rooted in and build from the white imagination. This is an imagination that we can no longer afford to expose Black youth and communities to. In the wake of Black Lives Matter movements across the nation, CREE researchers and educators must name Black haunting for what it is and what it evokes. With CREE, we are able to move towards a Black future and in doing so, we (researchers and educators) must name Blackness with a Black gaze, one where Blackness is made center and not only in opposition to whiteness. When CREE researchers make Blackness center, they move away from coded or safe terms that don’t fully capture the realities of Black life; they name the hauntings for what they are. However, CREE researchers don’t simply name Black life as a life that is haunted by oppression, they also give texture and fullness to the lives of Black folks and adequately frame and humanize them. In
our respective research, this has been second nature when working alongside our co-researchers.

Our commitments are to an inward gaze when engaging research in our own communities as well as asking the essential question – *is this school, organization, or classroom any better because I was here?* CREE researchers do not prioritize their gains in the academy over the lives of Black communities. Instead, we challenge ourselves to pour back what has been given and ask ourselves what we’ve left behind. Researchers who do not use CREE as a method are susceptible to being motivated by means and prioritizing gains in the academy more than the participants of their study. In fact, they may see themselves as entirely removed from the research, with participants regarded as mere objects of study.

Since CREE is about centering Blackness, applying it as a method then makes room for oral traditions like racial storytelling, counternarrative, creative and performative art forms. While research design often determines a researcher’s interview approach, we feel that CREE researchers must consider the sociopolitical context, background, preferred pronouns, first language, ability and other occupied identities of their participants when creating interview protocols. Frankly what a CREE researcher asks is already, by design, for the people and by the people.

CREE researchers must also make way for healing as praxis. This means that as a CREE researcher, we acknowledge that fostering a space is a small attempt at disrupting the historical school harm that K-12 institutions often perpetuate. Thus, these considerations shape our engagement and research process while also establishing relational trust needed before any true data is “collected.” In my (Courtney) research with Black youth and youth of color, I created a communal space where healing and restoration are at the core of how we share space together. Utilizing the arts, the youth and I were able to reimagine the world they desire where CREE is at the heart of this undertaking. Oftentimes, traditional researchers approach space as something one comes into, investigates within, and leaves upon completion. Unlike this approach, CREE researchers already understand the space is controlled by whiteness and thus it is essential to create a space where researcher and participants coexist and heal together.

While CREE can support traditional approaches to data collection, it also invites researchers to operate within a new schema that requires rigorous engagement with theory and knowledge as well as history and memory as data themselves. Meaning, what constitutes data is not always something that must be collected, per se. Instead, data is also living, experiencing, and understanding the shared history of a people. In traditional research, researchers can interview participants who may or may not be cognizant of how the white gaze and imagination have influenced their experiences in life. If the participant does not bring it up they may wrongfully presume that such history does not impact their life. For a CREE researcher, however, whether cognizant of how anti-Black violence operates hegemonically and, at times, like death by a thousand backstabbing cuts, they will realize a participant’s realization of history, or lack thereof, is emblematic of the trauma.
Historically, U.S. schools have served as institutions that forwarded the largely assimilationist and often violent white imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools (Paris & Alim, 2014). When schools deny the literacy experiences and practices of Black people, it is an example of anti-Black violence against Black humanity. The anti-Black violence that happens in the streets and in schools is undergirded by this dominant fear of Black lives which affects teaching and learning. As aforementioned, this same fear and deployment of the white imagination is what gave Zimmerman the brazen indignation to go on a manhunt after Trayvon Martin. Similarly, teachers, many of whom are white, feel entitled to surveil and target Black youth in classrooms (Love, 2016). Teachers are spending too much of their time on surveillance and punishment rather than understanding how this ominous fear is interconnected with a racial past that dangles in our present. Therefore, CREE is a method that not only rejects the white imagination but does away with its properties and instead invites a framing of Black futures and placing Black humanity at the forefront. In research with CREE, there is no damage centered framing (Tuck, 2009), there is only radical love and the Black radical imagination. This in turn means that there is no surveillance, policing, or persistent harm done to Black youth and communities in our classrooms nor our research. Therefore, researchers who employ CREE engage in critical self-reflection or reflexivity by first interrogating how their positionalities shape the research and communities they engage. Further, they apply a critical eye to the ways they frame the communities they work alongside in both their engagement and written research.

For researchers, we are also challenged to bring together theory in ways that offer new understandings about what it means to humanize Blackness. Using CREE as method should produce findings that trace implications of a historical past and how it shapes our current moment. Yet, these types of findings should also move us towards Black futures and away from binaries or oppression as our single story. In fact, to not think about the betterment of Black futurity is a type of anti-Black violence. Therefore, when literacy researchers uphold positivistic paradigms and research practices that dehumanize and marginalize Black communities by focusing on the ills or deficits rather than the richness and hopes, they too are violent. Paris and Winn (2014) writes that,

it is important to consider the ways in which people, and more specifically youth, are often “dehumanized” or – to borrow Blackburn’s words – “made less human by having their individuality, creativity, and humanity taken away, as when one is treated like a number or an object.”

(as cited in Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 1)

In the same manner, Haddix (2015) contends that educational researchers often perpetuate research practices that are wrapped in westernized and eurocentric ideologies that encourage Black and Brown communities to assimilate into
white culture and norms in order to fit into society. When researchers apply CREE as a method they focus on radical Black uplifting more so than white-centric degradations.

Applying CREE in various contexts

Teaching and learning for justice and humanization are ongoing projects that require a critical reflexivity. That is, as Paris and Alim define (2014), an inward gaze. In adopting this reflexivity, we must ask ourselves where we might be responsible for reproducing practices in our teaching and research that perpetuate ableist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, and xenophobic ideas and enactments.

Here, we are calling for CREE to not only invite educators and researchers to engage in critical reflexivity but also to apply this inward gaze to the action-oriented components of CREE. For educators and researchers that currently operate with criticality and humanization, it is already understood that the application of CREE alone is unable to accomplish the task of solving racism and white supremacy in schools and research. However, CREE does demand action from educators and researchers particularly in the areas of addressing race and racism in classrooms, dismantling dominant texts used in classrooms, and building on the Black literacies of Black youth (Johnson, 2017, 2018). In educational spaces, this may take on the form of critical race writing circles where educators facilitate guided reflection on race, racism, whiteness, white supremacy, and power within school and out-of-school spaces. Further, these circles can create an intimate space of healing for persons of color to engage in healing as praxis where white dominant norms and gazes cannot contract emotionality nor how youth of color/persons of color display their confrontations of haunting and racism. As we look towards the application of CREE as both theory and method in educational research, we acknowledge that in literacy education research, there is room to disrupt how language and literacy upholds dehumanization by its definitions of what are considered canonical texts, whose histories and literacies are reflected in literacy research as well as valuing methodologies that disrupt traditional notions of literacy instruction and literacy research (Sailors, Martinez, Davis, Goatley, & Willis, 2017). As such, CREE poses an opportunity to redefine canonical texts, ensuring that People of Color, especially Black people, are made center in this uptake. Equally, the histories and literacies reflected in literacy research cannot continue to see youth of color as “objects of study” rather than human beings complete with experiences that have historically engaged and defined literacy for themselves. This is why we name the need for critical reflexivity alongside CREE. Without it, the ways we intend for CREE to be applied become reduced to touch and go practices that further dehumanize the educational futures of Black youth and youth of color. While literacy research does maintain its scholarly conventions, we seek for CREE to undergird new critical methodologies like racial storytelling (Johnson, 2017), Black Feminist Womanist Storytelling (Baker-Bell, 2017), Black Girl Cartography (Butler,
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2018), and other critical modalities that embrace the stories and humanity of historically oppressed groups.

In writing this piece, we have been reticent to reduce CREE down to a series of steps that magically create an anti-racist world. Instead, we believe that by unsettling the bounds of which we have historically taught in classrooms or conducted research, we begin to move towards an engagement of anti-Black violence frameworks, methods, and methodologies thoughtfully. In doing so, we are better able to actuate justice in literacy classrooms as well as in literacy research.

Conclusion: towards Black futurity

It is important for us to name that applying CREE is not a step-by-step process that will lead Black youth or Black persons to sudden liberation. In fact, CREE is an unconventional theoretical framework and method that does not fit nicely and neatly in a box. Echoing Johnson (2018),

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.

(p. 120)

CREE is soul work – and, it compels and challenges researchers to dig deep down inside to understand ourselves in relation to racial justice. In short, it is not just about research. CREE pushes researchers to come full frontal with ourselves and the research we engage. Meaning, it demands that we investigate our own epistemological and ideological stance before even engaging in said research. Essentially, is the researcher’s mind free from the white imagination that hurts Black people? If so, how does one know? In what ways does the research move us towards a Black future? Teaching and learning for justice and humanization are ongoing projects that require a critical reflexivity that moves us closer to Black futures that operationalize the radical Black imagination. This requires what Paris and Alim define as an inward gaze (2014). In adopting this reflexivity and gaze, we must ask ourselves where we might be responsible for reproducing practices in our teaching and research that perpetuate ableist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, and xenophobic ideas and enactments. For researchers and educators who operate in the status quo realm of research, they are susceptible to replicating many of the harms we have detailed throughout this chapter to Black students and communities.

Our current sociopolitical climate reminds us that the white imagination is ever present and must not simply be interrogated but dismantled and exposed at its roots. We argue that educators and researchers must take on this charge. Bearing witness to this pervasive harm is not an option for those who position themselves as researchers or educators who do work in urban contexts.
and communities of color. With using a CREE method, researchers are better able to assess their intentions, humanize their research practices, and traverse new imaginations. For educators and researchers that forefront criticality and humanization, we know that the application of CREE as method alone is unable to accomplish the task of solving racism and white supremacy in schools and research.

Furthermore, using a CREE method demands action from educators and researchers, particularly in the areas of addressing race and racism in classrooms, dismantling dominant texts used in classrooms, and building on the Black literacies of Black youth (Johnson, 2017, 2018). To fashion research and practice that does this well, Black lives must be affirmed in the classroom by using methods that directly interrogate whiteness and the white imagination that harms Black students.

Note

1 Purposely lowercased to thwart the centering of whiteness.

References


