Revealing the Human and the Writer: The Promise of a Humanizing Writing Pedagogy for Black Students

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Recent research in writing with adolescents in out-of-school spaces provides insight into how young people learn to use writing to author their own lives. However, English language arts classrooms focus on correctness, form, and removing oneself from the texts composed in school. For Black students in particular, these expectations for writing dehumanize students, decenter their voices and contributions to intellectual discourses, and invoke deficit perspectives about their writing abilities and linguistic identities. Using a critical stance on place, literacy, and humanity in order to examine how the literacy learning and practices of ELA classrooms/schools might (de)humanize and (de)culturize Black students, this study examines the writing pedagogy of a professor who taught a semester-long creative writing class for students at West High School. Through a humanizing approach to teaching writing, the professor and students engaged in writing and being in ways that honored—as well as centered and supported—their individual, cultural, and writerly identities. This article offers ways that teachers of writing might tap into Black intellectual traditions and invite students to use writing as a way to connect to what they do and learn while at school.

The Promise of a Humanizing Writing Pedagogy for Black Students

Imagine that you have entered your third-period 11th-grade English class. Tables are arranged in neat rows, with two chairs per table—all facing the front of the room. Your teacher tells the class that you will continue listening to Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle.* The dry erase board is covered in the teacher's handwriting with notes from the previous day. The "warm-up" provides directions to copy each sentence and make corrections. After you and your classmates stumble through the sentences, the teacher provides the correct answers using call and response, and reiterates that you should have the correct version in your notes. "Y'all will see this on the ACT," she offers as another reminder. The teacher resumes the recording, stopping periodically to pose questions about plot. As the period nears

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its end, the teacher stops the recording and instructs the class to complete the exit slip. Today's question is, "Do you think Jeannette's parents are good or bad? Use at least one piece of textual evidence to support your answer." You pass your exit slip to your teacher on your way out.

It is important to note that the teacher and the students in the "regular" English class described above were Black. The teacher used both African American Language and American English to convey ideas, used call and response to check students' understanding, and tasked students with making a judgment about the characters using evidence from the text—practices that were linked to aspects of students' cultures and experiences. While such approaches provide opportunities for students to make connections between their lives and what they are learning in school, they fail to acknowledge students as contributors of knowledge or as creators of language and text worth engaging.

To some, the classroom experience described above may seem ideal. The teacher incorporated media and checked for understanding frequently as students followed along with the text. The class began and ended with a focused activity to ensure that students were engaged. However, when the teaching and learning are examined more closely, it becomes clear that these so-called best practices had little to do with students (or the teacher) engaging deeply with the content—a problem that inspired the line of inquiry guiding this work. Instead, the reading and writing could have served as methods for students to think deeply and authentically about how what they were learning connected to their pasts, presents, and futures. Opportunities to align and connect what they learn in schools with their lived experiences, as well as pedagogies that account for dehumanizing instructional and discipline practices of schooling, could have a lasting effect on the ways that Black students come to understand their intellectual and writerly selves.

For Black students in particular, cultural deficit perspectives and racist constructions of language, literacy, and literacy achievement (Anderson, 1988; Baker-Bell, 2019; Woodson, 1932) are used to explain why they do not do as well as their White counterparts (Rothstein, 2013). These damaging perspectives influence how Black students are educated in schools, as well as how teachers perceive and instruct them. Traditionally, literacy instruction for marginalized youth has been "data driven" (Neuman, 2016), grammar- and technical skills-focused (Tatum, 2006), and anti-Black (Baker-Bell, 2019), and has lacked the kind of engagement that leads to liberation (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Such approaches are offered as ways to improve the achievement of Black students and close the so-called gap between them and White students (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The opening vignette also reflects several conflicts between the promise and the reality of literacy teaching for Black youth. First, the physical space of the classroom removed opportunities for students and teachers to engage as a community and did not reflect their literate identities or literacy development (e.g., book choice, no representation of Black authors on the walls). Second, the pedagogical approach of focusing on "correctness" limited opportunities for dialogue that could lead to analysis and synthesis of text and left little room to think deeply about language

practice. And, finally, the little writing (and thinking) asked of the students missed the chance to connect their experiences to the content and context of what they learned. Such practices ignore the rich literate traditions of Black people (Fisher, 2009; Harris, 1992) and thereby (re)center whiteness in literacy teaching and learning (Gangi, 2008). Additionally, they exclude Black adolescent voices from the intellectual work of meaning-making that could happen in and through writing. In total, they do very little to fulfill the promise of quality public schooling for Black children (Morris, 2015).

Thus, the question guiding this research is: What happens when a teacher-scholar leverages historicized and humanizing views of Black orientations, identities, and literacy practices to teach writing? Moreover, this study examines the literacy practices of a creative writing class of Black students and Latrise, a Black teacher-scholar, (*the professor*[1], hereafter) in order to illuminate the writing pedagogical approaches used and the textual outcomes that centered and celebrated Black students' histories, identities, and experiences—practices that reveal the human and the writer. In addition, the professor considered the ways that Black people have been able to (re)write themselves into the world historically through language arts, included many of those traditions in the course as a way to decenter whiteness, and invited the students to read and write themselves into the context and content of their literacy learning (Winn, 2010).

Place, Literacy, and the (De)humanization and (De)culturization of Black Students: Theoretical Considerations

For this study, the authors consider critical stances on place, literacy, and humanity in order to examine how the literacy learning and practices of ELA classrooms/schools might (de)humanize and (de)culturize Black students. This triadic framework contends with the tensions that affect the educational experiences of students of color in public schools and is used to argue for more humanizing writing pedagogies that invite students to write themselves in and through their experiences as Black youth. For the sake of this article, Black orientations and cultural identities are understood as "inherited West African values, ideas, and beliefs" where individuals are (re)shaped and influenced by the experiences of the collective (Croft, Juergensen, Pogue, & Willis, 2018, p. 33). In other words, there is a Black cultural ethos where Black individuals shape and are shaped by a collective and communal understanding of elements like time, space, and expression. These collective and communal understandings of school(ing) situate the place of school and its practices as hostile (Meiners, 2007), anti-Black (Baker-Bell, 2019), culturally misaligned (Ladson-Billings, 2014), and dehumanizing (Goff et al., 2014).

School as place is "the embodiment of a purposefully created space that is a creation and enactment of the cultural and social conditions of the [people who occupy that place]" (Callejo-Pérez, Slater, & Fain, 2004, p. 1). School as place reflects a long and complicated history for Black people. And while the establishment of segregated public schools offered a glimmer of hope for Blacks during Reconstruction, several turning points (including but not limited to World War

II, Brown v. Board of Education I and II, massive resistance to the integration of public schools, federal involvement, busing, the civil rights movement, resegregation) have positioned school as a hostile place for Black people (Anderson, 1988; Morris & Morris, 2002). In addition, the signs, symbols, and curricula that represent American school and schooling do not reflect the study of practical and scholarly contributions that Black people have made. In other words, school continues to be an antagonistic place for students of color as curriculum, discipline practices, achievement data reporting, and pedagogies tend to center whiteness and support White, middle-class constructions of what it means to be a "good" student. Understanding school as place in both historical and contemporary contexts requires researchers to attend to the signs, symbols, bodies, and practices (i.e., place matter) of schools and classrooms, as well as to examine the local contexts and meaning-making of place matter for the (under)education of students of color.

As this work privileges a historicization of literacy that acknowledges the rich and textured lives of youth broadly and Black youth specifically (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Winn, 2015), it also recognizes the relationship of school as place (with history) with the schooling of African Americans that "deemed [the] most appropriate education [to be one that] emphasized rudimentary literacy skills and the inculcation of an ideology that guaranteed caste-like status" (Harris, 1992, p. 276). While contemporary views suggest that literacy is not defined solely by the ability to read and write, but encompasses knowledges, actions, emotions, exchange of ideas, and communal experiences, comparison of the multiple literacies that youth practice against the practices of school literacies reveals much tension. Ideologies that inform the literacies most practiced in schools tend to be instrumental, as literacy is used to dispense the "best knowledge," the content consists of "good books," and the writing demonstrated is "formal" (Stuckey, 1991). According to Stuckey, comprehension of particular information and ideology is how schools "turn out proper conformity and regulate failure" (p. 54). The logic of literacy presented in this way denies Black youths' own proclivities, interests, experiences, and engagements with/in literacy practice. It also racializes literacy achievement, seeking to remedy failure by entry into mainstream literacy practice and participation—namely, White, middle-class, heteronormative, and cisgender forms of literate being and belonging (Austin, 2018).

Historical perspectives of Black conceptions of literacy position Black people as demanders, creators, funders, and maintainers of educational institutions that have (a) provided literacy for all; (b) apprised individuals of and prepared them for the dominating culture's institutions; (c) counteracted the pernicious and venal images of African Americans prevalent in popular culture; and (d) engendered group solidarity and commitment to uplift (Harris, 1992). These perspectives are reflected in texts that historicize and imagine the lives of Black people, as well as in the contemporary composition of authentic portraits of Black people that challenge monolithic, dominant, and damaging narratives. The production and centering of such texts represent what is possible for teaching writing to Black youth, in that these texts serve as a "re-appraisal of . . . aesthetic values . . . [that are] less influenced

by the dominant standards" and allow Black youth to "be taught with real conviction the beauties of [their] own [lives]" (Johnson, 1936). These texts also provide models for how writing has been used to add the voices and perspectives of Black people to bodies of knowledge that have historically ignored their contributions.

Therefore, a humanizing writing pedagogical stance begins with the notion that students' knowledges (which encompass their collective and individual histories) are at the center of what they are expected to know and do while at school (Bartolomé, 1994; Donnell, 2007). Thus, a humanizing writing pedagogy provides a lens to view Black students' individual lives and creates opportunities for them to make personal, critical connections to a world where they share collective struggle related to the "circumstances of race status" (Johnson, 1936). With regard to writing instruction and the production of text, humanizing pedagogical processes require that pedagogues enact critical practices that interrupt normalized literacies and dominant ways of knowing and being. For instance, the full development of a writer depends on understanding oneself in relation to one's world (Johnson, 2017). That said, humanizing approaches to writing instruction and practice mean centering the writer in the processes and production of critically conscious writing—and, in this case, in ways that involve Black youth in the meaning-making that is part of a rich literary tradition. Indeed, Black people have historically "needed literacy in order to acquire freedom and power" (Harris, 1992, p. 278). And it is that history and re-centering of Black culture that is integral to humanizing writing pedagogies for Black youth as they (1) recall forms of literacy that privilege and are contingent upon students' sociohistorical lives, both proximally and distally; (2) are grounded in literate histories and traditions of Black people; and (3) invite Black students to compose and add their voices to various bodies of knowledges.

Writing in Place: Limitations of School-Sanctioned Writing for Black Adolescents

According to Yagelski (2009), "school-sponsored writing is about separating self from experience by changing an experience into a stylized textual artifact" (p. 19). In addition, the type of writing practiced in high school classrooms often requires that students remove, deny, and ignore important aspects of their writing identities. Specifically, English classrooms—and, consequently, writing instruction—reinforce hegemonic, heteronormative, patriarchal, and "standard" discourses as teachers center literature, practices, and skills aligned with normalized White, middle-class views of what it means to be intellectual (Johnson, 2017). According to Bartolomé (1994), "unless educational methods are situated in the students' cultural experiences, students will continue to show difficulty in mastering content area that is not only alien to their reality, but often antagonistic" to who they are or want to be (p. 191). This is true when students are learning to write. For Black students specifically, the reality is that the instruction they receive in schools is typically the result of the misinterpretation, denigration, and dismissal of their "languages, nonverbal cues, physical movements, learning styles, cognitive approaches, and worldviews" (Cooper, 2002, p. 48). As a result, Black students frequently experi-

ence the type of writing instruction that is tied to systemic inequities of literacy teaching, content, and expectations.

Recent scholarship that considers the writing lives of adolescents focuses on bridging their in- and out-of-school literacy practices by using innovative, digital tools and multimedia in order to respond to questions of identity, schooling, and being for historically marginalized students. Several studies describe novel projects that invite students to engage in writing processes that help them discover their voices, making meaning of the world around them in the process. Zenkov and Harmon (2009) conducted a study where "high school students of diverse backgrounds and living in poverty" were invited to compose a multimodal text to reflect on the purpose of school, supports they needed, and barriers to their success, with hopes that the students would "appreciate [their] English curricula" (p. 575). The researchers found that the use of images supported youths' ability to "paint pictures with words," which informed how ELA teachers might use visually based methods to "understand the points of view of urban youth and as tools in our writing activities" (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009, p. 583). A similar study conducted by Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz (2012) acknowledges the potential of digital tools to transform literacy learning. They encouraged digital composing that empowered students to be "producers and creators of knowledge within the classroom" (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, p. 190). What is different about these studies' approaches to writing instruction is that while the former study centered English curricula, the latter focused on empowering students as producers and creators of knowledge, was grounded in freedom, and aimed to improve the critical thinking and critical literacy skills students already had.

These studies, framed by sociocultural and sociopolitical understandings of literacy, illuminate the importance of developing literate identities in and beyond school. Researchers also recognize the need for paradigmatic shifts in the ways teachers of writing might use relevant approaches in order to reimagine what writing might look like for students with marginalized identities. However, the reality is that the dominant discourse of writing research and pedagogy urges teachers toward cognitive process models of writing and skills-based teaching (Gardner, 2018). Moreover, Cremlin and Oliver (2016) concluded that because teachers tend to have restricted views of writing and exhibit low confidence and negative writing histories, the teaching of writing is problematic. Confounded by the lack of writing teacher efficacy, standards for teaching writing outline an ambitious roadmap for what students should be able to do as proficient writers, but provide little direction on how writing benchmarks are to be achieved, and are "notably silent about the role of context" (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015, p. 501). And while both social/contextual and cognitive/motivational structures of effective writing instruction have potential in developing adolescent writers, these approaches do not fully attend to how the relationship to school as place for students with historically marginalized identities might affect efforts to "develop a writing environment that is motivating, pleasant, and nonthreatening, where teachers support students and their writing efforts" (Graham et al., 2015, p. 507).

Humanity Revealed in and through Writing with Black Youth on the Edges of School

In the past 10 years, an increasing amount of research has been conducted on the writerly lives of Black youth and how Black youths' literacies might be leveraged in ways that center their humanity (Everett, 2018; Johnson, 2015; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). These and other studies make visible the contemporary literacy practices that are connected to the literacy legacies of Black people. By centering intellectual and ideological traditions of Black people, these scholars offer ways that Black youth, like their ancestors, have used writing in order to write themselves into the world in authentic ways, as well as to counter problematic narratives that plague society's collective consciousness about being Black.

In her work with Black boys, Haddix (2009) interrupts dominant framings of Black males as nonwriters and posits that "the dominant discourse of failure initiates and sustains the dehumanization and objectification of Black male subjects, positioning them as scapegoats for failed academic efforts" (p. 343). For example, Haddix centers one student's views on writing as a counterstory to the dominant framing of Black male failure by illuminating his prowess for intellectual performance. Like Haddix, Kirkland and Jackson (2009) focus on how Black males use writing, "cool talk," drawing, and dressing in order to construct ways of being Black that position them as creators of their own symbols and signals of literate identity. Another study showing Black males' construction of scholarly identities in and through writing is Everett's (2016) work with high school students, where one Black male used metaphor to interrogate his schooling experiences.

In studies that focus on Black girls, similar approaches have been used to understand how writing identities are developed by centering students' lived experiences as well as Black ways of doing literacy and being literate. Hall (2011) notes the ways Black girls used scene writing in order to "testify" about friendship and sisterhood in ways that included oral-aural traditions of Black culture. In a study focused on the digital literacies of Black girls, Price-Dennis (2016) posits that digital spaces have the potential to be transformative and helpful in constructing a model for being fully human in the world. Using "Black women leading thinkers such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Phillis Wheatley, and Anna Julia Cooper," Price-Dennis conceptualizes the social, political, economic, and historical contexts that are tied to Black girls' understanding of what it means to be literate. Such constructions of literacy for Black girls are important, as deficit perspectives of Black girlhood, like Black boyhood, dominate educational discourse. Price-Dennis (2016) found that the literate identities of the Black girl participants were "*tied to their identities as Black girls*" (pp. 357–358, italics in original). In other words, there is a Black collective identity to which the participants felt connected. Most importantly, this work offers an exploration of how digital spaces were used to help "Black girls create, control, and disseminate ideas that validate their understanding of what it means to be proficient, literate, excellent, thriving, and brilliant" (Price-Dennis, 2016, p. 360).

These studies are important in understanding how the relationship between literacy and blackness is connected to how Black youth experience school. Unfortunately, many of these studies center practices that are happening on the edges of school and reflect literacy work that is being done with youth, possibly in schools, but not as a part of their ELA (or other) curriculum or in collaboration with their ELA teachers. In this way, these studies highlight the fact that Black students' ability to write themselves into bodies of knowledge is more likely to occur outside of the classroom than inside it.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger ethnographic research project, in which Latrise has reimagined her role as researcher and located her teaching and research with/in one local school community. For this project, she has utilized practitioner inquiry to observe patterns and create conditions for imaging and enacting new possibilities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Hannah's expertise in literacy classrooms was important to the professor's delimitation as an ethnographer whose roles and work with/in a local high school had shifted and created more fortuitous research and teaching experiences (Green, 2014). The second author was integral in analyzing and interpreting the pedagogical approaches set by the professor, as they understand collaboration to be an element of humanizing approaches to teaching and conducting research.

School Context and Participants

The study took place at West High School.[2] At the time of the study, it served 752 students, approximately 95% of whom identified as African American, 4% as White, and less than 1% as Hispanic, Latinx, or multiracial; 63% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunch. West was the only high school that offered the International Baccalaureate program in the school system. The school had 41 full-time faculty and housed numerous programs that focused on student achievement and social development. West also partnered with nearby colleges to offer dual-enrollment and early college. At the school, the professor also served as professor in residence, in which she was involved in research, teaching, and service with/in the school's community. Her role as professor in residence led to the opportunity to teach a one-semester English elective at the high school.

Out of 31 students, 30 identified as African American/Black and 1 identified as "mixed" or biracial. The class comprised 1 ninth grader, 7 tenth graders, and 23 eleventh graders; 2 students volunteered to take the course, while the others were enrolled by the school's registrar. The class represented a diverse group of students with different interests, abilities, and experiences. For example, Nagasi, a male in the 10th grade, described his writing as "ok," and his skill level was developing. He did not particularly enjoy writing. However, he loved to talk about his experiences growing up with cerebral palsy and bragged about his ability to walk even though doctors told his mom he would not. Fari, a biracial female in 9th grade, loved writing and described her own writing as "unique." Fari would

write several pages per day. She wrote independently and would often share her fantasy narratives written outside of class with the professor.

To help the professor get to know the students, their first writing assignment was titled, "25 Things You Don't See When You Look at Me." They wrote about how old they were, favorite musicians, and least favorite subjects. Students also used the assignment to share insights into their worlds, as well as statements about what they hoped and dreamed for their lives. While the statements gave the professor insight into students' lived experiences, they also revealed a wide range of interests, traits, and ideas with which she connected. Incorporating this assignment early on in the course was instrumental in the students' first steps toward understanding and validating their realities as resources to draw on in their writing.

Researchers' Positionalities

The professor, Latrise, is a Black, queer educator with 17 years of teaching experience. She is an associate professor of literacy and professor in residence at West High School, where she explores local and broader questions related to (1) the in-, out-, and edge-of school literacy practices of nondominant and/or historically marginalized youth; (2) how educators leverage students' existing literacy practices in order to teach in ways that are liberating and empowering for all students; and (3) her role as teacher/researcher in posing questions and solving problems with/in nondominant and historically marginalized communities.

Hannah is a White PhD student, research assistant, and classroom teacher. She entered the project at the analysis phase to gain insight into various ways of conducting humanizing research—in this case, through interpretation of data. Her collaboration on this project was integral to co-constructing the ways humanizing pedagogies were understood in the context of the professor's work at West High School. While her contribution to this work was an opportunity to practice data analysis and writing for publication, her perspective was important to the meaning-making needed to understand the complexities of the pedagogical choices made by the professor, of the experiences of the students, and of the writing they did together.

Data Collection and Analysis

The professor began collecting data on day 1 of the semester-long course beginning August 4, 2017, and ending December 18, 2017. The class met Monday through Friday from 2:05 to 3:30 p.m. for 18 weeks. Artifacts from the entire course are a part of the data set. The professor wrote field notes after each class, including descriptions of what was observed throughout the class period. At times, the professor would jot notes during class if particular phenomena struck her as important. She also kept a notebook where she collected artifacts that were not student work. Some examples include pictures, personal notes, hall passes, and extra copies of handouts and readings. The professor's field notebook, artifacts, and daily writing journals were collected throughout the course and organized by type of artifact/writing example. The professor collected 19 of the 31 journals. All students' and professor's writing and work collected were considered data.

In analyzing the data for this study, the authors started with a list of codes that were grounded in the ways they were defining humanizing writing instruction and practice. Initial codes were revealed where the professor and students engaged in teaching and writing that allowed them to explore and compose identities, share important aspects of their being, grapple with experiences, and write toward deeper understandings of self in relation to schooling. Sample codes include *personal identity, social/collective (Black) identity, experiences* (named and categorized), *criticality, transformation,* and *healing.* Table 1 illustrates examples of how pedagogical decisions and texts were coded according to purpose, function, and context. For example, in the course's syllabus, the professor included, "Changing the World with Our Word" as one unit's title. "Our" was initially coded as *collective identity,* given that humanizing pedagogy for Black students was being developed and defined to include Black cultural ethological understandings. From these codes/coding, the authors created interpretive statements in order to identify themes in the data. These themes included *honoring Black ways of knowing and being* and *centering and supporting (Black) identity/writerly development.* Because of the nature of classroom teaching and learning, as well as the authors' thinking with (developing) theory, post-coding analysis was necessary for noting what was instrumental and salient to understanding the nature of participants' writing in relation to a humanizing pedagogy.

For the professor, being at West High School presented many opportunities to understand the data within and apart from larger contexts. In other words, making meaning of students' writing also took place while the professor was coming to understand West High School and the communities where she and these students were members. Being at the school for the semester in a teaching capacity made everything that occurred (before and beyond the class) viable data, and also made member checks possible throughout the data collection and interpretation processes. We conducted post-coding analysis in order to include what we now know and offer as humanizing writing pedagogy.

Findings: Leveraging Historicized and Humanizing Views of Black Youth to Teach Writing

In the following sections, we describe the pedagogical choices made by the professor, exploring how specific pedagogical choices functioned in the classroom space and how they fit with/in broader school contexts. In addition, we shed light on the texts that resulted when students were invited to write their lives as well as to critique relevant broader issues. We then discuss why humanizing writing pedagogies for Black youth are important in remembering and reimagining school as a place where their literate legacies and writerly lives are honored.

Reimagining School as *Our* Place: Centering Black Literary Traditions

The professor was intentional about communicating to students that school was a place where she and her Black students belonged. She wanted to be sure that the space reflected and supported what Winn (formerly Fisher, 2003) calls *African*

Table 1. **Data Analysis Matrix**

Research Question	What happens when a teacher-scholar leverages historical and humanizing views of Black orientations, identities, and literacies to teach writing?	
Unit of Data (e.g., one pedagogical choice/approach, one text)	The professor included language in the syllabus that referred to a collective identity.	The List—an assignment that invited students to compose a list and descriptions that were related to their lived experiences.
Themes	Honoring Black ways of knowing and being	Centering and supporting student (Black) identity/writerly development
Patterns	Purpose: To signal to students that Black students/writers have something to say that is significant Function: A signal to students that their voices are included and important to issues *in* and beyond the classroom Context: Students rarely experienced opportunities to think of themselves as writers in the context of school(ing).	Purpose: To center students' individual experiences Function: A way for students to critique and connect their experiences to larger ideas around being African American Context: Students were exposed to other ways of thinking and writing beyond those stressed in their ELA classrooms.
Post-coding Analysis	Students were reminded through the handouts, texts by Black authors, lessons, classroom discourse, and writing, that their voice was a legitimate part of bodies of knowledge.	Students were exposed to ways of writing themselves in the world that invited their lived experiences and centered what they knew and were finding out about being and being Black. The List offered a way into writing that allowed even the most reluctant writers to locate context in their lives to compose text.

diasporic participatory literacy traditions (ADPLTs). The space needed to support fluid and critical literacy participation that was based on flexibility, responsibility, and intergenerational connections (Fisher, 2003; Pogue, 2015), and the students needed to "read" that the space was a reflection of their Black intellectual lineage. ADPLTs were reflected in the overall discourse of the class, as well as in the place matter—that is, the signs, symbols, bodies, and practices of the course.

Creating Communal Space and Sharing

The classroom contained six tables, each with six chairs; each table was furnished with a small metal bucket that contained markers, highlighters, colored pencils,

pens, role tags for group activities, and a picture of one of six writers of color (Solange, Paulo Coelho, Tupac, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin). For the professor, providing students with equal access to tools for learning (e.g., pens, markers, composition books, etc.) daily was an intentional and important choice. While many of the students lived in impoverished neighborhoods on the city's west and south sides, the professor was most interested in providing access to the material wealth that she now had access to through employment as well as material resources from the university.

Many students brought earphones to listen to their own music. However, the professor often played music ranging from John Coltrane to Tupac from a Bluetooth speaker for the entire class. Many times, students would request music they wanted to hear and included the names of artists on the whiteboard under "Request for Class Playlist." Music, table chatter, and student movement created a relaxed and uninhibited classroom atmosphere that supported a sense of freedom, interaction, and sharing.

Belonging with/in Intellectual Spaces and Building Community

The arrangement of the desks was used to support collaboration and discussion, optimize students' ability to talk through their ideas, and support the transition of oral ideation to the written word (Pogue, 2015). At these tables, the professor encouraged students to talk through their ideas and share their writing with each other, and wrote with students to model how dialogue could be used as an authoring move. Intergenerational connection was also supported through this arrangement, as students were reminded to consult the writing (text creation) of seasoned writers they knew and were learning about in class.

The "25 Things You Don't See When You Look at Me" assignment invited students to compose 25 sentences/statements that reflected parts of their social and personal identities. For example, several students included family members who had passed away and how tragedies had affected their families. Four students wrote about their sexuality; two identified as gay, one said they were straight, and Delu, a 16-year-old female, proclaimed, "My sexuality is fluid." Other students used metaphor to provide insight into their personalities. Nilah, a 15-year-old female, declared, "I am an unfinished puzzle, put together and broken." From their statements, the professor learned that several of the girls in the class loved wearing "lashes." Five wrote statements about their hair, two of them wrote about their love of football, and Aire connected several statements to her love for basketball. The professor completed the same assignment in order to reveal parts of her own identity that students could connect with.

Centering Our Voices

The texts used in the course centered Black voices, and the approaches to teaching illustrated how text by and centering African Americans could be used to learn concepts and skills from students' "regular" English classes. According to Tatum (2006), "neither effective reading strategies nor comprehensive literacy reform efforts will [decrease the education debt] in a race- and class-based society unless

meaningful texts are at the core of the curriculum" (pp. 47–48). The meaningful texts used in this course—that is, texts authored by writers who readers identified with on sociocultural and experiential levels—offered a way for students to see their current lives reflected in what they learned about and through writing.

Other opportunities to center Black composers as legitimate context for study included the use of an edited version of Tupac's "Me and My Girlfriend" in order to teach extended metaphor (Shakur, 1996, track 10). The professor referenced Black movies and art in class lectures and discussions. For example, the professor referred to movies, like *Friday* (Charbonnet & Gray, 1995), when explaining elements of story and used Black music to explain how writers experiment with language to make old concepts new. One discussion invited students to think of instances where their favorite songs, traditionally nonacademic texts, might serve as context for scholarly and intellectual inquiry.

The professor, who identified as a writer, wanted her students to witness the vulnerability involved in storying one's experience. For example, while drafting "Things My Dad Told Me," she shared that her list was a way to remember her father and highlighted that the meaning was located in her own feelings about those moments. Sharing personal stories and mutually constructing their work opened avenues of trust and vulnerability between students and the professor. It also invited them to think about the many ways they could write themselves into classrooms, schools, and the world. When Black students are invited to use the stuff of their everyday lives in their writing, they have the opportunity to add their experiences to classroom discourses, and—more importantly—to see their experiences as valuable content for teaching and learning. One example of this is Sapphire's journal entry, "The Flea Market," where she described "the crowded aisles of knock-offs and club clothes" and "getting grilled corn on the cob with my cousin." In her responses to students' writing, the professor often commented that particular lines were inspiring, funny, or "messed up"; in this case, she wrote to Sapphire that the above lines "belonged in literature."

The pedagogical approaches used to center students' lives and the contributions of Black people created a classroom environment that reflected a sense of freedom and intellectual engagement that was evident in students' writing. When the class discussed writing, little attention was given to using "standard" English or writing in strict formats. Instead, students were encouraged to experiment with language and learn to communicate in ways that spoke to their intended audiences. In addition, the professor wanted her students to recognize that much of what they encountered in the form of everyday music and youth culture could serve as content for intellectual engagement and good writing. Traditions like call and response, playing the dozens, writing from experience, sharing stories orally, and song were integral to carving a school space for Black students that fostered their intellectual development and considered their individual and collective identities. The signs, symbols, bodies, and practices of the course reflected a celebration of Black identity and were used to illustrate to students that the content of Black culture was worthy of study *in schools* and for gaining understanding of many matters of the world.

"On a Whole Other Level Now": Fostering Personal, Social, and Writerly Identities for Black Adolescents

In and through writing, the professor and students centered and celebrated small things in their lives. For example, King wrote about things that were a part of him, including his scars, art, clothes, arm bands, and shoes that were "armor to protect my feet from the dangerous ground as I walk up the stairs of life"—a metaphor that he used throughout his writing. In his list, King celebrated himself, his choice of style, and his talent. Students wrote in ways that celebrated aspects of their lived experiences, while experimenting with form. What resulted was writing that was fresh, funny, and reflective as it showcased students' being and becoming. For example, in an assignment entitled "Remember Me," inspired by an assignment from Linda Christensen's (2017) *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up,* Aire wrote:

> I'm a bold young woman
> Dancing in my dreams.
>
> Writing and admiring.
> My critique:
> My writing sounds awesome to me.
>
> When performing
> Shy:
> I'll never be.
> I'm a star when my audience reads me.
>
> Brave and proud is what I aim to be.
> I am Aire
> What you thought?
> I know you remember me. (October 13, 2017)

Aire's poem reflected a confidence in herself, her writing, and who/how she aimed to be. There was also a sense of fearlessness in Aire's poem that showed up in other students' writing as well. Students were not afraid to share aspects of their lives that could be misinterpreted, used against them, or dismissed by some of their teachers. For example, Jazz shared her poem, "Hiding the Truth":

> Sitting in the classroom
> laughing
> talking
> eating.
> WAIT!
> "[to teacher], may I go to the restroom?"
> I usually go to change my clothes for work.
> But this time,
> I went for another reason.
> What did I leave for this time?
> The world may never know. (September 29, 2017)

Similarly, Safi wrote freely about choices made throughout her life. Her list, "Things I Regret," read:

> Lying to my mom: I had homework and wanted to play—I got a bad grade and as a result I got in even more trouble.
> Calling my sister ugly: She made me mad and I said what I was thinking—It lowered her self-esteem.
> Watching Jeepers Creepers at Night: We were just having fun—I was four and couldn't go to sleep.
> Moving to Montgomery: It was after the house fire—worst school year of my life!
> Not Watching my dog: She attacked a smaller dog to protect her puppies—They put her down. Not keeping the Puppies: We didn't want to separate them from their mother—They put them down too.
> Skipping class: In Montgomery, I didn't like my teacher—I got caught.
> Not taking risks: I stay at home during fun events—I miss out.
> Eating undercooked yams: My great aunt cooked them—I got food poisoning.
> Contemplating suicide: After the fire we lost everything and I thought without me expenses would decrease—I almost gave up my future. (November 13, 2017)

At the intersection of celebrating other ways of knowing and being (in most cases, Black culture), writing from experiences, and freedom was the type of writing where the students took risks and shared aspects of their lives that made for engaging context.

Many times, students aligned larger issues of racism, classism, and inequity with local and personal issues that affected their own lives. For example, Nagasi used "The List" assignment to compare his identity to Black men who had been killed by police. His list, entitled "A List of How I Am Like Men Killed by Police," explained:

> Eric Garner and I are alike because he was a peacemaker.
> John Crawford and I are alike because he loved to help people out and he had a kind heart. Just like me.
> Ezell Ford and I are the same because we both have asthma.
> Rumain Brisbon and I are the same because he was a hard-working man who loved and took care of his family. (September 13, 2017)

Nilah celebrated the different figures of women. Her list, "Things Women Are Shaped Like," read:

> Milkshake: full figured, big bust, wide hips, large thighs—beautiful.
> Coca-Cola: hourglass, small waist, proportioned evenly—lovely.
> Hi-C: small frame, short, petite—gorgeous.
> Peppermint: classic, underestimated, saggy boobs, stretch marks—fabulous.
> (September 12, 2017)

Through the creation of her list, Nilah produced images of women that celebrated their different figures and shapes. Her writing honored women's physical appearance. Reading, writing, and discussion focused around issues relevant to Black lives inspired students' writing. Access to texts that celebrated Black culture, that critiqued systems of oppression and discrimination, and that provided models of different ways to add one's voice to larger discourses were integral to students' meaning-making and to their writing.

Messenger, an 11th-grade student, used the dedication page of her portfolio to comment on her growth as a writer:

> I would like to dedicate my writing to Ms. Johnson. Her encouragement and guidance have helped me out a lot. When my writing was bad she took notice and gave me advice on how to improve by leaving sticky notes in my journal. Believe it or not I really did read each and every one of them and took into account what she was saying. Because of that I am on a whole other level now. She teaches because she loves to share her knowledge with the students and enhance our minds. Before taking creative writing, I would just throw words on to the paper. Now I delve into the deepest parts of my mind when I write. (December 13, 2017)

Messenger's dedication illustrated how she had grown to be more thoughtful and introspective in her writing, and how she had improved as a writer who was "on a whole other level now."

School as the *Write* Place: A Discussion on Developing Black Student Writers in ELA Classrooms

There is a growing body of research that has explored the literacy participation of Black people in light of broader discourses, institutions, and relations of power, particularly in out-of-school contexts (Fisher, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015). Scholars have noted the need for what Hill (2011) refers to as *literacy counterpublics*, "spaces in which written texts are central to the engagement of social practices that enable participants to challenge the authority of the state, develop oppositional politics, reinterpret dominant social narratives and counter-narrate their own lived experiences" (p. 41). Understanding school as a space where curriculum, policies, and practices work to deculturize and dehumanize Black students is necessary for undoing the damage that has been done by privileging mainstream intellectual, cultural, and political ways of being and knowing found in schools (Hill, 2011). In order to counter some of the practices the professor observed in other ELA classrooms, her efforts to center Black ways of being and knowing were intentional and informed primarily by the collective identities of the students. The professor acknowledged and used the cultural backgrounds of students in literacy and language instruction (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012); she also named and located opportunities to incorporate African American language features and linguistic registers into literacy teaching and learn-

ing processes—practices used to include Black students as legitimate and valued participants in the teaching and learning that happens in schools.

Each writing opportunity encouraged students to explore who they were and prompted them to use their experiences to communicate who they were becoming. In writing, the students exposed who they were as humans and who they were as writers—both worthy of attention and development. Furthermore, their stories and texts became a part of the curriculum as their epistemic privilege was centered in their writing development. For example, students wrote about personal content that, at times, offered "forbidden knowledge or critique" and made possible the inclusion of "fugitive knowledge and counterhegemonic perspectives" that were imperative to their critical consciousness (Nelson, 2011, p. 475).

For Black students, being invited to write oneself into classrooms is a necessary prerequisite for writing oneself into the world. Providing students with guidance and mentorship in writing well, and centering Black literary traditions within teacher practice, invite students to locate places in their own ways of knowing that serve as content and context for their writing development and literate being (Fisher, 2009; Hill, 2011; Johnson, 2017).

Decentering Whiteness in ELA Teaching and Learning: Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

The history of schooling in the United States is driven by racialization, and Black students have been subjected to institutionalized conditions that contradict their humanity (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). Given this, it is important that we locate ways to attend to the intellectual needs of Black students in our schools. The English language arts classroom provides a significant place to begin as ELA scholars and teacher educators are illuminating the ways white supremacy of language (Baker-Bell, 2019; de los Ríos et al., 2019), of literature (Thomas, 2019; Webb, 2019), and of discipline (Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019; Winn, 2018) policies and practice devalue Black ways of knowing, being, and doing in schools. Such scholarship can inform more equitable and transformative ways forward for the teaching of English language arts.

Teachers must first reject deficit perspectives used to pathologize the literacy abilities, practices, and participation of Black students (Bartolomé, 1994). Doing so will require that teachers research and read texts by Black authors beyond the select few that have made it into the cannon. Teachers will also have to engage with these texts in ways that prepare them to make pedagogical and contextual connections in order to teach relevant content. To help students become better writers, teachers might consider assignments that invite students to share aspects of their lived experiences. For instance, instead of assigning writing for the purposes of understanding students' command of language and idea development regarding arbitrary topics, instructors could begin with writing assignments that invite students to reveal themselves as humans and as writers. In engaging writing that centers students' epistemic privilege, teachers of writing must look inward at their own assumptions about what counts as good writing and interrogate their

own instructional practices that might be grounded in racist, heteronormative, and classist language systems designated as normal or standard. Instead, teachers can help students understand how their language use compares with other forms, and encourage them to push the boundaries of language by considering how to engage particular audiences.

Most of the structures of school and schooling, as well its professional workforce, center whiteness. When teachers of writing require "standard English" or focus on normalized content, many students are unable to locate themselves with/in the teaching and learning of literacy classrooms. In other words, in classrooms that center colonized literacy practice—that is, practices that determine who is (and who is not) literacy-proficient, ignore students' funds of knowledge, mandate banking and normalized pedagogies, and deny cultural relevancy—students sacrifice essential parts of their humanity (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Shelton & Altwerger, 2015). For Black students, this reality is starker.

On the other hand, instructors who teach students to write well by centering and privileging their realities and languages facilitate the types of learning/doing/being that shape intellectual identities and encourage personal and societal transformation. As a result of a humanizing approach to teaching writing, students in the course featured in this study affirmed their joy, pain, ideas, and experiences. Through meaningful mentor texts, they learned to write well from writers who had similar experiences and ways of being in the world. It is important that teachers acknowledge and invite students to write themselves into teaching/learning landscapes that reflect their identities, histories, cultures, and values. When teachers of writing use students' everyday experiences to teach writing and see them as part of a rich literate tradition, they tap into students' intellectual heritage and invite students to connect to what they do and learn while at school.

Humanizing writing pedagogies support the development of a critical consciousness and center the everyday lived experiences of youth of color. So much of what students read, do, and study in school is devoid of images, languages, and texts that remind them of their intellectual lineage. For students of color in particular, humanizing environments and practices have the potential to transform their relationship with learning and writing as they come to understand that their experiences provide context and content toward critical examination of their worlds. With such an understanding, writing becomes a way for them to confront racism, injustice, and structural disadvantages in their lives, within communities, and around the world. And, in doing so, writing becomes a way for students to reclaim and assert their own beautifully complex humanity.

NOTE

1. We use *the professor* to embody what Walker (2009) delineates as a uniquely positioned conduit of ideas, knowledges, and tools to support schools and deploy resources with the primary goal of uplifting Black communities.

2. The names of the school and participants are pseudonyms.

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