

A Dialogue on Race, Racism, White Privilege, and White Supremacy in English Education

The reason for this special issue on whiteness in English education is as simple as it is urgent: Too often, white people have recognized neither the obvious nor nuanced ways that whiteness is a problem for English teaching and learning, and white people have failed to contribute to the change that is desperately needed in the field. In imagining this special issue, we (guest editors Christina Berchini and Samuel Jaye Tanner) invited critical race and literacy scholars Timothy Lensmire and Valerie Kinloch to introduce the issue with an editorial, framed as a dialogue that addresses the “why” and the “what” behind this themed issue and the articles contained therein.

As Kinloch and Lensmire describe below, the assumption of many in the United States is that to talk about race means to talk about People of Color. With this special issue, we seek to violate that assumption by highlighting the need for more white people to take responsibility for talking about race, racism, white privilege, and white supremacy. In what follows, Lensmire and Kinloch offer insights into this special issue and the role whiteness has played and continues to play in English education.

Note: In this special issue, we consciously do not capitalize *white* and *whiteness*. This decision represents our effort to see whiteness as an identity that, according to Samuel Tanner (this issue), is not usually taken up in solidarity by white people in relation to antiracist work, which allows us to destabilize white and whiteness as totalizing categories.

Dear Valerie,

I hope you are well.

We had decided to write this editorial as a dialogue, in the hopes that

it would allow our different perspectives and strengths to be expressed as we commented on this special issue of *English Education*. While we share, I think, a number of commitments and concerns in relation to U.S. schools and society, I come at these as a white man who was born and raised in a rural, working-class family and community. My career as a critical scholar can be divided into two roughly equal parts. In the first, I focused on how social class and gender played out in progressive and critical pedagogies, specifically in the teaching of writing in elementary schools. It's in the second half of my career that I started taking up race and racism seriously, with particular attention to how white people learn to be white in our white supremacist society. I've been worried that antiracist pedagogies in teacher education too often bring conceptions of whiteness and white racial identities that undermine rather than strengthen such efforts.

Narratives of lives and careers, especially exceptionally condensed ones like mine above, probably conceal as much as they disclose. But we don't have all that many words with which to work. Would you like to tell one, too? Peace.

Tim

Dear Tim,

I agree we both share a number of commitments and concerns when it comes to deeply thinking about and working on behalf of the educational promise and potential of U.S. schools and society. This is the case when it comes to justice and educational equity, freedom and social equality. As a language and literacy scholar with investments in equity, justice, People and Communities of Color, and critically engaged learning, my work has focused on examining how young people, particularly in urban environments, assert agency and critical capacities in the face of racial injustice, violence, pressures of linguistic conformity, and with the inadequacies of schooling, generally, to fully engage the complexities of youth identities. And, this is often the case within often hostile environments that reproduce heteronormative, patriarchal white supremacist discourses. More specifically, I've always been concerned with working against deficit perspectives and monocultural values that get enacted onto many Black and Brown youth. I believe this enactment can or, I must say, does have the potential to stifle the brilliance, bravery, and beauty of young People of Color—inside schools and throughout society.

Thanks,

Valerie

Hi Valerie,

As I read your account of your commitments and concerns, my reading kept being interrupted by my memories of your talk in St. Louis at the NCTE Annual Convention, when, along with Garrett Duncan, we were on that NCTE panel on racism. Your talk was powerful and, somehow, the power of your thought is already evident and rumbling in the few words you wrote above.

One aspect of this special issue that readers might find disconcerting is *how seldom* the focus of your concern—Black and Brown youth—show up in its pages. These youth appear as minor characters in some of Samuel Tanner’s stories about how students of color taught him about his own whiteness. Older Black men appear as fear-inspiring-then-helpful figures at the beginning of Pauli Badenhorst’s piece. All of the special issue’s authors acknowledge and make explicit use of Black and Brown writers and scholars—including Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Sara Ahmed, Anne Cheng, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Thandeka—in their work. But it is only in Justin Grinage’s article that a Black youth takes center stage for a moment, and even this is in service of the close examination of the pedagogical moves of his white teacher, Mr. Turner.

Thus, this special issue on critical whiteness studies in English education violates the assumption of many in the United States that to talk about race means to talk about People of Color. More significantly, this focus on whiteness and white people raises the question of whether work like this functions to recenter whiteness in ways that, in the end, undermine rather than strengthen antiracist efforts. My own response to this question usually begins by recounting how, shortly after World War II, Richard Wright responded to a French reporter’s question about “the Negro problem” in America by saying that there wasn’t a “Negro problem,” only a white problem. Still, the question is an important one and, for me, there are certainly many, many more ways for the sort of effort pursued in this special issue to go wrong than there are ways for it to go right.

Valerie, given your longstanding and fierce commitments to countering deficit assumptions toward Black and Brown youth and to illuminating their “brilliance, bravery, and beauty,” how do you orient yourself toward and make sense of this special issue?

Peace.

Tim

Dear Tim,

I’ll be honest with you. Being invited and accepting the invitation to work

with the authors of a special issue on critical whiteness studies in English education posed somewhat of a challenge for me. At first, I was not sure why I was “invited in” and why I would want to be invited in and advise authors whose articles centered whiteness in English education. I was baffled to the point that I seriously considered not accepting what I believed to be a strange invitation. Then, I began to reflect on past conversations I had with Phillip, one of the youth participants with whom I collaborated on a multiyear examination of literacy, race, and gentrification in New York City’s Harlem community. It was Phillip, a 17-year-old Black boy at the time, who talked about “the white-ification of the ’hood,” that is, the various ways Black communities and cultural ways of being regularly get reappropriated by discourses of whiteness and the presence of white people who, historically, did not show up or live, in large number, in spaces where some Black people, in the majority and within urban communities, resided. It was Phillip who asked me, “you see this? All these changes, these new people we ain’t never seen here before. You know Harlem’s not gonna be the same, right?” (Kinloch, 2010, p. 89). His questions served as a point of entry for not only me but also for many of his peers to think about meanings of white-ification. More specifically, his questions also pushed us to consider how whiteness gets inscribed, reified, and normalized in not only our educational processes but also, dare I say, in the functioning of some of our familial and intimate living spaces.

I remember conversations I had with Phillip about white-ification, which encouraged me to think about how whiteness is pervasive and gets both systemized and normalized in ways that perpetuate “the ongoing marginalization, oppression, and traumatization of students belonging to Communities of Color” (Kinloch & Dixon, 2018, p. 154). Then, I recalled what you stated, Tim, during your talk on our NCTE panel on racism. You talked passionately about how white people become white and how the unexplored struggles of white people reproduce white supremacy. When you said this, I sat there looking at you and wondering: When will (and can) more white people take responsibility for talking about race and racism, white privilege and white supremacy, without insisting that this is not their work to do?

If I am recalling correctly, you quoted James Baldwin (1962), who indicated that “white people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (p. 22). Shortly after I left our session, I caught myself wanting to ask you: How can white people engage in this learning by taking responsibility? What do you see white people taking responsibility for (how do we/they name *it*)?

How can this learning look for them, and what can it mean for how they reenter classrooms to work with Black and Brown youth? Connected to these questions were these: Are you talking about a type of learning that's reflective of antiracist approaches to teaching and in teacher education, or are you talking about another type of learning? What are the fears, hesitations, and resistances that, in my opinion, are already grounded and steeped in privilege, that this type of learning raises for white people?

All of this to say that it was a combination of Phillip's theorizations about white-ification and your presentation on ways to debunk white privilege pedagogy that convinced me to join this special issue of *English Education* and to think about the role whiteness has played and continues to play in teaching and learning. On the other hand, joining this effort was my attempt to learn how some of our English education colleagues position (or do not position at all) Black and Brown youth **and** Black and Brown education scholars within existing conversations about whiteness, white privilege, and racial identities. That's how I have come to make sense of my involvement in this special issue and how I orient myself in this work.

What about you, Tim? How do you orient your body of work in whiteness studies in light of, or in juxtaposition to, the articles included in this special issue? Do you see the articles as moving this work forward in ways that not only critique whiteness but also engender or engage in transformative antiracist practices in English education?

Until next time,

Valerie

Dear Valerie,

Your last message made me wish that, instead of writing back and forth, we were sitting together somewhere, talking. I would love to take up your many crucial questions with you—but this would generate many tens of thousands of words, I'm sure. So, I will try to answer only your last few questions, about how my own research and writing might relate to the articles of this special issue and what difference any of this might make for antiracist work in English education.

Once I had decided that I needed to focus my work on race and education in the United States, it took me many years to read and start positioning myself in relation to various literatures (and this labor continues, certainly). What I found most helpful was scholarship in critical whiteness and cultural studies, especially work in labor history that was inspired by W. E. B. DuBois's (1935/1992) *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. Toward

the end of this book, DuBois explored why white workers during this period identified, *not* with their Black comrades, but with white elites. DuBois argued that this was because white workers were paid “a sort of public and psychological wage” (p. 700) by white elites—one that did little to alter these laborers’ material conditions, but that enabled them to think of themselves as different from and superior to Black people. As DuBois put it:

They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks. . . . Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. (pp. 700–701)

Ralph Ellison’s (1953/1995, 1986) writing on how white Americans engaged in scapegoating rituals to reassure themselves of their superiority helped me extend DuBois’s ideas. And Thandeka (2001), in turn, told psychoanalytic and historical stories that helped me understand how different violences that white people inflict on other white people (especially across lines of social class and age) lead to the everyday and horrific violences against People of Color that characterize our white supremacist society (see Lensmire, 2017).

This all may seem disconnected from what happens in schools and teacher education, but I have long been worried that the current dominant critical framework for understanding racism and whiteness—a white privilege framework, popularized by writers such as Peggy McIntosh and Tim Wise—ignores complexities and conflicts that attend learning to be and being white, with grim results for imagining and living out antiracist work with white people. The articles of this special issue are motivated by similar concerns and aim to create alternative accounts of whiteness and white racial identity, in the interest of opening up possibilities for more effective antiracist English education.

In our review of a decade’s worth of research on white teacher identity, James Jupp, Theodora Berry, and I (2016) noted that, too often, work in this field ignored the social contexts within which white teacher identities were constructed, almost as if racial identities were created in a vacuum. I think that one of the true strengths of this special issue is how the authors locate white actors within smaller and larger scenes, and then pay close attention to what this means for the thinking, feeling, and action of white educators.

Berchini’s article about a beginning white teacher, Mr. Kurt, is a wonderful example of what can be learned with such an approach. While I tend, in my own work, to read the racial identities of white (and rural)

people against the backdrop of historical race and social class struggles, Berchini provides a close description and analysis of how white students, other white teachers, and prescribed curricula affected Mr. Kurt's aspirations for himself and his pedagogy.

A second strength of this special issue flows, I think, from this attention to context. Most antiracist work in education focuses on the relationship between white people and People of Color. But what if our antiracist efforts are being undermined because of what is going on *among white people*? Tanner's article highlights this question. And in Grinage's article, the violence done to a Black student is accomplished exactly by how his white teacher chooses to orient himself toward another student—a white student. The articles of this special issue illuminate how whiteness is reproduced and challenged in day-to-day interactions among white youth and adults.

When I think of how work like this might make a difference, I imagine people reading and discussing articles like these, together—using the stories and theorizing gathered here to sort out their thinking and feeling, using them to guide their future action.

Any final words, Valerie?

It's been a pleasure doing this with you. Be well. Peace.

Tim

Dear Tim,

In another conversation at another time, perhaps we can extend this discussion. I would love to dig into your *coming into* and *focusing on* race and education in the context of the United States. I am interested in learning more about your process and privilege, as well as the curiosities and concerns that led you, a self-identified white person, to explicitly focus on whiteness and race, whiteness as race in education. How does a white person decide to do this work, and at what moment does this decision get acted upon? What are motivating forces and circumstances that can finally encourage a person to change the course and take up whiteness in critical ways? I ask these questions from a place of interest, as I have never *not* thought about my being Black and about my Blackness in all the spaces within which I exist, including the classroom. I see your *coming into* and *focusing on* race and education as necessary moves that other white people need to take up. It is my hope that in taking these things up, more white people will ground theoretical and praxis-oriented discussions of being white and of whiteness within complex, complicated conversations on racism, racial identities, rights, and—for the purposes of an English education audience—antiracist teaching. But, for another time . . .

For now, let me admit I found it important that you named your worries about how racism and whiteness often get positioned, theorized, and taken up by white people. Thank you for admitting that those worries get you to question the criticality of a dominant and, in your words, “white privilege framework popularized by writers such as Peggy McIntosh and Tim Wise.” While I have used their works in some of my earlier teaching and research, I have always wondered about the impact of their thinking for moving people into critical antiracist practice. Such practice must disrupt what we think we know about whiteness (the superficiality of whiteness as a checklist) and center on how to better engage in antiracist practices by focusing on racial identities, social context, and power. I think the articles in this special issue push us to do antiracist work. This is the case in light of the challenges and opportunities that present themselves and in relation to the domineering presence and role of whiteness in English education.

As I read Berchini’s article, I kept wanting, and waiting for, Mr. Kurt to invite students into a conversation about why they were focusing on white supremacy, white privilege, and institutionalized racism. As I kept waiting, I could feel the tension building among students, even as he kept pushing to have conversations about whiteness and racism. While it seemed as if his efforts did not work, Berchini’s analysis places necessary attention on why white people need to nuance their understandings of, and approaches to teaching about, the problematic nature of whiteness in English education.

Similarly, in Tanner’s article, I kept thinking about his idea that white people “have been made white in a white supremacist society.” I kept wondering how this idea affects white people’s understandings of, and relationships with, People of Color and Communities of Color as well as how it affects white people’s work with white people. Your question, Tim, is such a good one: “But what if our antiracist efforts are being undermined because of what is going on *among white people*?” This is a question I reflect on when I (re)read Tanner’s piece.

Finally, Grinage’s article made me mad because it does a wonderful job of showcasing how a teacher, Mr. Turner, reproduces whiteness and white privilege inside the classroom. When he physically positions himself in agreement with Nick, a white student, after verbally agreeing with Richard, a Black student, during a discussion on racial progress, I felt violated. I began to imagine how Richard, in that very moment and in front of his peers, must have felt in witnessing the power and danger of whiteness. Grinage’s article, as well as those by Berchini and Tanner, do an important job of demonstrating the reproduction of whiteness and white privilege within the context of English education. I want to thank them for inviting me into

this discussion, and I want to thank you, Tim, for engaging in this exchange of ideas with me.

And the work continues,

Valerie

Acknowledgments

We—guest editors Christina Berchini and Samuel J. Tanner—believe in the ability of the conversations contained in this special issue to act as a starting point to effect the change that is desperately needed in English education praxis. This issue, however, would not exist if not for Tara Star Johnson’s belief in the same. We are indebted to *English Education* editor Tara Star Johnson for helping us to advance these conversations, and for her help in conceptualizing this issue. We are grateful to Tara, her assistant editor Shea Kerkhoff, and editorial assistants Chea Parton, Tiffany Karalis, and David Premont for their feedback and eagle-eyed support during the entire editorial process. We would also like to acknowledge and thank the scholars who contributed to this issue—their contributions do much to advance our understandings about the power and danger of whiteness and the racial/racist dynamics that get reproduced and maintained in the context of English education. Finally, we are indebted to Valerie Kinloch and Tim Lensmire, both of whom served as mentors throughout this process. Thank you, Valerie and Tim, for believing in the potential for this work to get more white people taking responsibility for talking about—and acting on—how race, racism, white privilege, and white supremacy play out in English education.

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Timothy J. Lensmire is a professor at the University of Minnesota. His early research focused on how the teaching of writing might contribute to education for radical democracy. His most recent book, *White Folks: Race and Identity in Rural America*, draws on in-depth interviews with people from a small rural community in Wisconsin, as well as on his own experiences growing up there, to explore how white people learn to be “white” and how their lives are dependent on People of Color, even in situations where white people have little or no contact with racial others.



Valerie Kinloch is the Renée and Richard Goldman Dean of the School of Education and a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Her scholarship examines the literacies of youth and adults in and outside of schools, with attention placed on race, place, literacy, and equity. She is a past recipient of the Outstanding Book of the Year Award from the American Educational Research Association, the AERA Scholars of Color Early Career Award, and, among others, the Rewey Belle Inglis Award for Outstanding Women in English Education from the National Council of Teachers of English.