“Beyond the Dream”: Critical Perspectives on Black Textual Expressivities . . .
Between the World and Me

That was a moment, a joyous moment, beyond The Dream—a moment imbued by a power more gorgeous than any voting rights bill. This power, this black power, originates in a view of the American galaxy taken from a dark and essential planet.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me

A world of texts exists beyond the Dream, beyond the revered writings of Shakespeare and other “classical” authors that bend and point in time to a direction of our deepest and most disturbing reveries. This world originates out of view, conspicuously hidden, found beyond the (ec)centricities of what James Baldwin would see as textual oppression. To most, it is a closed world where the imagination of the privileged flourishes and where the perspectives of the less privileged disappear into the social and historical abyss. Indeed, the English language arts (ELA) classroom has claimed a part in this grand project of textual oppression, deleting from our galaxy of perspectives a dark matter that might actually hold together the entirety of our literary universe (Morrison).

Lost in the Dream

To be fair, amazing developments have happened and are happening in the teaching of ELA. Today, like no other time before it, we celebrate an assortment of authors as wide-ranging as Arundhati Roy, Junot Diaz, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou (among many others) and as fiercely as we venerate the White male gods we place in the pantheon of our literary universe. Still, the supposed progress we’ve charted basks in the Dream, the false ideals and stale fictive tropes that tokenize the few at the expense of the many. The Dream overreaches, and profoundly so, through figments of inclusion by not mentioning (and by never having to mention) what it leaves out. In the background of this progress is the multitude of voices held in silence—a chorus of the unseen, of perspectives, languages, and literacies that go unrehearsed in the study of English; and the many forms of expression we devalue systematically in the academic sphere.

The Dream is also captive and captivating, romanticized though locked in its own mythological prisms of post-racialism, coloring debates about a grander, more elusive kind of progress. It lives as shadow in the dark, dystopic, neo-racial reality, denying the consequence that, to upend racism, we must first deal with race. Thus, each of these moments of “progress” embraces ceremony more than truth. It seizes solely on ritualized scenes and settings that fabricate illusions of themselves, denying the essence of truth expressed and denied in divided textualities—the rift thrusting itself “between the world and me”—in a process of fashioning a progress that lulls us all firmly asleep (Wright).

It is in our slumber that the Dream, for what so many in our profession have yearned, lies even as it places at our feet reason to believe in the change that we hold possible. The Dream is more than a
chamber of make-believe, however. It is a room of a thousand and one echoes once only filled by the sounds of White (male) writers speaking to one another. The promise of the Dream, at least up to this point in our literary history, was that any White writer (usually male) could emerge from the chaos of echoes through hard work and genius, and be heard. However, on the hills of various rights movements and other historical campaigns for freedom and inclusion (i.e., the Harlem Renaissance, American Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s–1960s, the Black Pride and Power Movements of the 1970s and 1980s, the Second and Third Wave Feminist Movements, the rise of hip-hop, the Latin American and Caribbean literary revolutions, etc.), the Dream proffered the (dis)reality of ELA anew. This discrepancy created a new crease in the literary universe, a rift in the status quo that made room for new voices to raise age-old echoes. In this new space, the literary universe featured a cluster of new stars—women and people of color and other once excluded celestial possibilities. It also featured the voices of the poor and the unusual all screaming in harmony, in the resonances of a not easily forgotten literary past.

Lost in the Dream, many could only see progress in ELA, but were simultaneously blind to how constraining, how encompassing the Dream actually was. While certain “new” texts were included, they accounted for only a few of the once excluded perspectives. These “new” perspectives were not those written by the (literary) elite; the newly included writers stemmed from the grassroots and were particularized. Notwithstanding, these writers were variably constrained, not allowed to (nor could they ever alone) express the full range of secrets bound within the literary universe. Thus, even with the inclusion of authors such as Morrison and Diaz and Kaur, of books like Milk and Honey, Middlesex, The God of Small Things, and Go Tell It on the Mountain, ELA remained fast asleep in a dream, set in the illusion of change where possibilities for difference were occasioned by textual practices that trivialized and deleted differences as opposed to extending them.

Beyond the Dream

In the light of the Dream, Morrison became the next Hemingway; Hughes, the next Wordsworth. Yet, the voiceless masses who were writing their stories beyond the Dream in genres unknown and through textualities devalued, remained “nobody” (cf. Hill). Further, the textual expressivities produced by the once excluded (now included) worked to exclude other voices. While the included voices gained incredible purchase in the market place of textualities that enrich ELA classrooms, an exclusion of particular voices and perspectives persisted. In this system of deletion, the included textualities became useful in the old project of literary domination and for caricaturing non-dominant—in this case, Black—life. Instead of unsettling it, the “included” helped to steady the course of the single story upon which the grand narratives of Whiteness could be charmed.

Critics such as Morrison and Adichie would later reveal how ELA as a product of the “White literary imagination” acts as conduit for the maintenance of a single story (Adichie). This single story is what Morrison describes as the “master narrative.” Students of texts that maintain the master narrative are sadly left to know only the empty tragedies of our biases (such as the exotic narratives of Black ghetto life or the characterizations of Black womanhood as a tragic trope). In all their perceived complexity, Black writers, mostly women, were exposing the Dream for what it was and is still: a room of locked doors that elide the obscurities of the many echoes that exist beyond it.

These writers illustrate a world beyond the Dream, where there is an awakening—a moment imbued with a power more gorgeous than our current understandings of what has constituted ELA. Moreover, within the scope of what is truly present and possible, there is a power, a poetic, transitory, Black textual power, that possesses supernatural hearing, healing, and the full compassion to appreciate the range of expressivities that make known and knowable the Black textual universe.

Beyond the Dream is a space where Morrison isn’t made to represent all Black textual thought, where tropes of Black life exist as composite and complicated, where discourse is humanizing, not authored for and to a White world that looks on in bemused pity and contempt (Du Bois; Morrison). Beyond the Dream, Black textual expressivities, as they decenter the project of Euro, hegemonic print centricity, represent a world of common tastes—the poetry of writers such as Denez Smith and Aja...
Monet, the lyrics of Homeboy Sandman and Queen GodIs, the vilified forms of pre-exilic literacies—from tags to tattoos to the play of oral secrets staged daily on corners, porches, and in beauty shops.

Of course, it is progress that Morrison’s, Angelou’s, and Walker’s voices can be heard, and finally! It is also progress that ELA classrooms can take up themes that fall squarely in the trenches of Black life. But progress has never merited itself as a destination. In many cases, it is merely an assessment of the journey. One would rather be lost completely than be found partially, and then given up on. One of the chief challenges with moving beyond the Dream is the misconception that progress is the awakening. However, in the Dream, progress has often been used to support that which it opposes. Beyond the Dream, progress is never enough because progress in itself is not progress.

**Black (Textual) Life Matters**

Black textual life has come a long way; however, how far it has come is not simply a question of magnitude or distance. At the heart of the journey is a question of power (and not of progress). Power is the ability to express, and thus shape, the world and its meaning through one’s own perspectives, of having others’ sight shaped by what you value and want them to see. We ELA teachers have a peculiar, tortured relationship with power. We want it both ways. We talk about the power of the written word to shift scales of thought while consistently limiting, hence, diminishing, the kinds of texts we privilege in the English classroom.

This special issue of *English Journal (EJ)* is, thus, concerned with power, chiefly the rendering of the un(fo)seen textual products of Black lives and how they might further revolutionize the teaching of English by extending (as opposed to limiting) it. In doing so, this issue features arguments that deal with the substance of Black lives, that is, Black (textual) life, which is carved into lineages of Black bones and lives on the lips of Black people, detailed in our scars and in the souls of folk tucked away in forgotten neighborhoods and forsaken histories. This work is all the more important because it is within Black textual life that we are, at one level, witnessing what Cornel West calls “a democratic awakening,” the unique union of rights groups with poor and vulnerable people who are asking the right kinds of questions and demanding immediate answers.

At another level, this work is important because it frames conversations on how Black textual life has exposed the ways in which too many people are fast asleep, entranced (and sometimes deeply hypnotized) by what Ta-Nehisi Coates and I have called *The Dream*, “the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing” (50). As I have laid out here, on the other side of The Dream—in the midst of a humanistic arousal—Black textual expressivities, the hidden and excluded textual expressions of those who have been traditionally silenced in ELA—the queer, the person of color, the poor, the stateless—allow for re-envisioning of dreams.

Borne online through social media and other platforms of dissemination, this special issue of *EJ* highlights ways in which Black textual expressivities offer opportunities to arouse the masses lulled into complacency by the sedating rhetorics of racial mythology—chiefly post-racialism and the promises of progress affixed to the Dream. In this light, it can be hard to come up against one’s own blindness, even when, as ELA teachers, we are supposed to be guides led by the greater light of impartiality. It can be terrifying to come to the realization that it is possible to teach in this blind spot for years. Whole classrooms, in fact whole systems, make their home in this blind spot.
A goal of the issue is to help us all see clearer in this blurry moment in history where people are insisting on being valued and heard while being devalued and silenced. This insistence should give us teachers of English language arts cause to search for the higher consciousness that provokes our practice. Thus, another goal of the issue is to remind us that our nation, though filled with the promises of progress, continues its deep disregard for Black lives. But a few looming examples of our current state of inequities include the massive use of state power to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of Black and Brown bodies; the de facto legalization of murder against the Children of the Rainbow; chronic and mass un(der)employment; devastated, wasted, and occupied communities; heightened state surveillance. For Black lives to matter, for Black life to endure, for the Dream to be shattered and replaced with true freedom, the structures supporting oppression must be dismantled. To dismantle them, we need a revolution in English language arts. This revolution must be as powerful as the systems that sustain human suffering, systems that maintain an entrenched racial caste (deeply rooted even in our curricula).

For some people, this issue will be a clarion call. For others, it will read as a threat—at best, a suggestion to catch up and engage with a subject, race, a topic that for a long time we’ve been determined to avoid. The complaint will be that the aforementioned revolution in ELA is a byproduct of a P.C. culture in the extreme. But whenever I hear this critique, I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s sober appraisal of “anti-P.C. backlash”: “What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them” (Dreifus).

Thus, the articles selected for this issue are about defining on new terms what constitutes ELA. Each article seeks to reimagine English language arts teaching, measuring the work of English language arts teachers on scales of human rights and human potential. Each author asks questions such as: How might English language arts classrooms help move students beyond The Dream? To describe and critique the logics, structures, and realities of racial caste and other systems of disparity defined by race, they seek to understand how English language arts teachers might use Black textual expressivities—the many textual forms that express the substances of Black life—as they come to value and reveal Black lives. Texts, here, are broadly defined, situated across a field of multisensual potentialities—visual and aural, written and inscribed, read and listened to.

This issue of EJ seeks to interrupt the conventional stability of ELA maintained primarily because of an unwillingness of some to consider history or even entertain the long line of arguments pushing what ELA should be. Thus, the articles selected for this issue all foster a particular vision of a “New English Education” based beyond particular versions of Whiteness that most people, including many Whites, no longer inhabit (Kirkland). Some will outright reject this premise, and we must respect that. But conditions beyond such rejection will never show that ELA magically exists outside the structures of power that dominate every other aspect of our daily lives. The authors of this issue have dared here to imagine a better, stronger, and newer ELA that could be produced if we teachers accept the challenge to stretch and grow our imaginations. If we afford the same depth of humanity, interest in, and nuance to textualities that veer from tradition and take seriously those stories, words, ways of being in the world, and the worlds others have imagined, and actually think about power—how far could we go?

In the most basic sense, this issue is about acknowledging how Black textualities, like vulnerable Black bodies, are contested in American classrooms, complicated by competing interests that wrestle daily for an ethical place in the consciousness of English language arts. It is in English language arts classrooms, as this issue suggests, that Black textualities have the power to move our assumptions past beliefs that strip away the humanity of others. They can bring us closer to those complex narratives of people that build humanity and nurture sensitivities that abolish internal and external contracts of bigotry and violence. Through such textualities, English language arts teaching takes on a new meaning. And it is here that the teaching of English signifies its highest virtue: instructing the mind as well as the heart. It is here that ELA means teaching for justice, which is always and only about teaching (to) love.
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Works Cited


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Black English
My students took the English Language Arts Common Core Regent on June 14, 2016. In their eyes, I read . . .
I got this Miss
I know this like the back of my hand
Literary analysis unfold
Kendrick Lamar has bars,
I know
Cus I’ve read them all with my English teacher.
How he spit fire on Compton Crip gangs
Spoke truth about Kunta
Showed me, the Blacker the Berry
My juice is valued.
His rhetoric,
Personification
Connotation
Deliverance and Annotation.
Participation in all these elements—
Literary devices
Lyrical spices,
Got me
Re-reading twice this . . .
Holds genius in his vice
Got me planting my own heist
To take over these words
Make them my own
If I identified them there, I can identify them anywhere . . .
Right?

Persuasive argument two fold.
The week we read James Baldwin was my favorite.
If I tell you why you cant laugh, promise?
My language was valued
When my teacher let us fill the board with our words . . . I mean our words
Freddie Gray, I: able to breathe.
I knew the answer.
and it wasn’t wrong.
So let me ask you this, I say
if Black English isn’t a Language, What Is?
Through this I built my premises of the English language my only nemesis
I got this Miss.
Watch me show the board of Regents my style:
through your teaching me
how Kendrick words have paved me
Baldwin’s words saved me,
my own voice craved me
until the school system failed me
condensed, minimized, shred me
got to the test and it didn’t recognize me,
identify me
looking for the bubble on the sheet with the choice:
accept me.

—Arianna Talebian
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