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"Unhobble[ing]" Black Futures through Visual Essay Filmmaking

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> "...the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us." – Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

> "Conversations about Black Language are ultimately conversations about Black humanity. It's that critical." – Geneva Smitherman, *Black Idiom*

Abstract

This article explores a conceptual lesson project exploring Black youth learners' critical, creative thinking through a visual essay project. The aims of this lesson are to identify associative assumptions within Black youth learners' imagination, to unveil and/or trace salient and significant themes and motifs, to examine the narrative effect, and to investigate the influence on Black youths' access to critical, creative thinking. Foregrounding Toni Morrison's (1992) concept of "unhobbl[ing]" as a praxis useful in language arts teaching methods situated in decolonialized, anti-racist, and abolition teaching curricula. This project takes up critical language awareness, critical literacy, and Anti-Racist Linguistic Pedagogy to address the consequences of "an inflicted language," in relationship to Black youth, Black education praxis, and Black futures. Academic English language is the site of interrogation as a technology of illiteracy, that I posit as "imagination interference." Conjoining Black feminist thought and socio-cognitive psychology theories, this conceptual lesson centers Black youth learners in middle grade language arts classrooms and insists that Black diasporic imagination is indispensable to cultivating Black futures.

Keywords: Critical literacy, critical thinking, creative thinking, project-based learning, imagination, Black youth learners, STEM literacy, academic language, interdisciplinary

Introduction

How do we get to the future imagined in Black studies and Afrofuturistic literature, and what skills are necessary for the journey? How do we look closer at intergenerational educational practices of marginalized groups in the U.S. and societies similar in structure and functions to inform our questions?

Emphasized by international organizations that assemble transnational economic and governance policies, 21st- century emerging literacies should focus on developing or increasing the applicability of innovative thinking, critical decision-making, and capacity for uncertainty.

> "Ability to communicate, share, and use the information to solve complex problems, in being able to adapt and innovate in response to new demands, changing circumstances, and heightened degrees of uncertainty, in being able to marshal and expand the power of technology to create new knowledge, and in expanding human capacity and productivity" (Binkley et al., 2012, p. 17).

These skills are also indispensable to the creation of loving, decolonized, and equitable worlds with strong sustainability possibilities. For that reason, as we enter an era of constant and continuous emergence of advanced technologies that reduce human intervention in manual, technical, and specialized processes, our current cyclical, antiquated, always back-to-basics compulsory schooling and its denial, and witness of the under-preparing of the United States' youth population places everyone's future at risk. In such an economy of increased decline in occupations where functional literacy is a valued asset to gain access to resources, educators must remain diligent and creative in not only demanding equitable schooling conditions and curricula, but without fancy, design stentorian attention for the educative methods necessary for collective needs, welfare, and insight into the advanced cognitive development of our youth.

Critical Literacy

Critical language and literacy scholars have directed our attention to anti-Black mechanisms at play in literacy practices and pedagogical approaches at varying levels in U.S. schools. Scholars such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, James Baldwin, Geneva Smitherman, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and H. S. Alim examination and critique of "spoken and written language, culture, education, and social and political marginalization of minoritized ethnic groups" (Byrd et al., p. vi) greatly influenced and laid the way for the critical pivot to view "literacy as social practice" (Street, 1995, p. 24). Critical literacy research expanded the concept of literacy beyond the ability to read and to write to examine notions of power in discourse within school settings. The framework of critical literacy is located within New Literacy Studies (NLS), which are rooted in theories mainstreamed by Brian V. Street (1995), that situated literacy within socio-cultural dynamics. Yet, despite the corpus of critical scholarship making plain the challenges faced by culturally and linguistically rich students subjected to mainstreamed K-12 literacy standards, politicized research, and curriculum development are steadfast in maintaining limited epistemologies while tapering in the ongoing interrogation of a coded language and its implications for the futures required of our living. These limitations are exasperated in contexts of cultural and social evolution in conjunction with technological merger deeply embedded in our everyday existence. The political polarization in the U. S. has reignited antebellum-like agendas focused on censorship, outdated proficiency measures, and civic obedience with an evangelical crusade towards suppression. Costly and counterintuitive to the brilliant research of anti-racist education scholars, many U.S. teacher preparation/certification programs replicate the production of such supremacist and color-blind ideologies, because "the training of most English teachers has concentrated on the appreciation and analysis of literature, rather than on an understanding of the

nature of language" ("Students' right to their own language position statement" (SRTOL), (1974, n.p.).

Language of Schools

Many shifts occur when defining academic English language, however, consistent across language, linguistic, and literacy scholarship, academic English language is "described as a register that contains lexical, grammatical, and interpersonal skills specific to school that all students must master to be successful" (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 9). In addition, Baker-Bell confirms in their work that the academic English language is indeed a site of interrogation for anti-Black schooling practices. English as a subject in primary grades is structured for the attainment and possession of a command of the language spoken in the country. Once a student moves to secondary schooling, English/Language Arts as a content becomes the teaching of perspective, ideologies, and ways to decode and language the world that are standard to U. S. customs and values. Academic English language research spanning across multiple content areas is an abstract, yet odd tapestry illuminating arguments that affix at power and access, or the lack thereof. Thus, within this conceptual lesson project, following the tradition of Black education, language, literacy, and linguistic scholarship, Black language is prioritized as a distinct, complex, and beautiful technology. Intentional centering of Black language speaks to my positionality that influences my assumptions, research, composition, and dissemination of interpretations.

Tracing the genealogy of African American Vernacular English scholarship (AAVE), the ingenuity of Black scholars proffered critical frameworks to analyze systems of education, illuminating profound political connections that favor destructive inequities. A rich collection of this research explicitly call-out de facto anti-Black rituals and routines in U.S. schooling practices, especially instruction via language arts curricula. Toni Morrison found fault in instructional practices used in societies like the U.S.:

> "It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging." (as cited in LeClair, 1981, pp. 123-124)

Academic standardization of a language that has looted cultures, evacuated Indigenous and diasporic ontologies, and shackled temporality in western linear epistemology subverts cognitive activities rooted in mother tongues that speaks beyond the English cosmologies embedded in the non-official language. As the Black community continued in the struggle for liberation in the 1950s and '60s, activists, community members, and families spoke against the injustices via schooling and the schoolbooks used in the instruction of Black youth. Many involved in the movement for civil rights stated, "textbooks didn't represent minorities," therefore, Morrison, having temporarily moved back to Ohio after educating at Howard University, took the position as a book editor at L. W. Singer, a division of Random House in Syracuse, New York. "Silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate (Morrison, 1992, p. 9).

However, the “achievement gap” narrative and the policies of intervention that systemically target marginalized students insist on this oversight of disruptive distortions caused by the teaching and learning methods within American schools. John Baugh (2017) asserts, “ill-conceived investigation… has spawned misguided efforts to close the presumptive word gap while simultaneously ignoring other root cases for educational disparities” (p. 40). Root causes are the ways Black Americans are cognitively positioned through various modes of “schooling,” including punishment and correction, to view themselves, their ancestral contributions to world-making, and their current genius abilities and capabilities. Academic language and literacy research confirmed, “more children fail or quit school because they cannot handle academic language than because they cannot decode…” (Gee, 1992 p. 62). Thus, observing the gatekeeping, property-holding, ostracizing, school-to-prisons mechanisms in academic language, Black youth learners navigate codes of power deployed without ceasing to educatively displace them. However, striving for Black liberation through education, as “an act of love” (hooks, 1994), and the “cultivating of genius” (Muhammad & Love, 2020) remain the purpose of Black educators. This project addresses academic language and its active role in reinforcing oppressive structures its proficiency gloats to dismantle. Irrespective of its assumed value, when Black students are forced to operationalize the “language of schooling” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 9); “it not only causes mandatory acculturation but imposes a thought pattern” (Ivanič & Simpson, 1992, p. 156) that we understand to be counterproductive to Black youth cognition. For this article, cognition refers to the dynamic processes of memory and imagination, happening simultaneously (Morrison, 1992).

Under what conditions do Black cognition become vulnerable to nation-state sanitization, thus deleterious? Cynthia Dillard's (2012) scholarship summoned the restoration of cultural memories, to recall and remember to bring about (re)new ways of knowing. Studies, theories, and practices of remembrance can inform the recognition and transformation of Black self-actualization & identities; "through developing critical consciousness, a radical and mobilizing new awareness to knowledge and knowledge production” (Dei, 2012, p. 110). Therefore, this conceptual lesson aims to rediscover ways diasporic memories and imagination are recharged and optimized for critical thinking, mobility, and utilization. In this effort we must soberly consider forgetting as a mode of state violence within Black communities; in particular, historical memory, and trauma that is shared.

Black Youth Learners and Schooling

Entanglements of language, literacy, and power mapped by Collins and Blot (2003) confirmed through historical analysis, “the purpose of schooling… emphasized the need for public obedience rather than public participation” (p. 77). To mute, assimilate, and subjugate Indigenous, African, and Black Americans through deceptive narratives explicitly and implicitly encoded in the language of schooling were solutions European-Americans deemed necessary to convert the ‘savage’. Power and privilege situated academic English language and its sentry of ‘proper’ and/or ‘standard’ in the hands of what would be known as the middle-class citizen. Language, in all its beauty and awe, became dis-rated to establish deep socio-racial division among groups of people; to communicate with one another morphed into a procedural understanding based solely on a lexical, grammatical, and syntactical dialect of eurocentric beliefs. June Jordan (2003/2009) emphasized, “if we collaborate with the powerful then our language will lose its currency as a means to tell the truth in order to change the truth” (p. 222). Woefully, notions of power and subjugation were

embedded and disseminated through education reforms such as common and charity schools (Collins & Blot, 2003), Anti-literacy laws (Pritchard, 2017), Rockefeller's General Education Board (GEB) (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992), and the many other agendas targeting specific "poor" communities, mostly Black Americans to "not encourag[e] academics for these children… to teach students not to be philosophers, men of science, lawyers, doctors, or politicians but to meet the "lowly" needs of rural life (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992, p. 20).

Harriet Jacobs (1861/2001) recalled in her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave" (p. 2). There is an eerie likeness between Jacobs's recollection and the timeline of schooling in U. S. education systems. For most, at the age of six years old, children enter their formal years of education, and it is also the time many Black, young, eager, and alive children experience their first lessons of being Black in America. An incongruous juncture where Black community traditions of getting a good education via schools', the functions of schooling, and the lessons of servitude connect to nation-state agendas.

The Special Issue of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in the fall of 1974 stated, "Reading difficulties may be a result of… interference from the emotional bias of the material… In short, reading is so complicated a process that it provides temptations to people who want to offer easy explanations and solutions" (SRTOL, 1974, p. 10). I draw connections between critical language awareness, linguistics, and cognitive psychology theories to bring forth the concept of 'imagination interference', resisting siloed and disciplined theories of Black youths' experience in U.S. schooling contexts. Bridging interference in language discourse through a theory of forgetting that suggests, "inaccessibility of otherwise available information is that the act of recalling some information produces decrements in the recall of other similar information at a later time" (Roediger, 1974, p. 261) in an effort to offer an inquiry of critical examination. Therefore, positioning imagination as an advanced and necessary literacy, and drawing more attention to be closely with its ways of knowing, and the possibilities of cultivation in decolonized, anti-racist, and abolitionist education environments.

As of 2021, 49.4 million students attend public schools, and of that, 7.4 million are Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although education's statistical narrative is unreliable and the site of rhetorical Black death, what is certain are the possibilities millions of Black youths are experiencing a dilemma that remains under-recognized in our education policies, praxis, and research. In the 30 years of administration, NAEP reports indicate that Black/African American children have never reached above 18% proficiency in reading and language arts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, p. 5). The concern and impetus remain in the systemic fallacies that veil who the data is informing because as Smitherman (2017) noted "more money has been spent on the same remedies that have not worked well in the past." (p. 501), and yet the corporate investors continue to profit off the "illiteracy problem" of Black youth.

What is revealed when we examine the deep structures "meaning…. depends on social attitudes, and cultural norms (SRTOL, 1974); "the raw material used to construct our sentences and phrases; it is the actual source of meaning" (Smiterman, 2017) of academic English language and place the concept within larger socio-political contexts? More specifically, what ideas and perspectives are conveyed through complex grammatical structures that only render certain students' "solutions"

by internalizing division and negation as means of "success?" Smitherman (2017) educated us about Carl Bereiter, and his misread of Black language noting "the absence of the concept of negation, i.e., the word not does not appear in the Black pre-schoolers," (p. 502) commencing "deficient" interventions for Black youth. However, June Jordan (1988) explained,

> "Our language devolves from a culture that abhors all abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person who is speaking or listening. And every sentence assumes the living and active participation of at least two human beings, the speaker and the listener" (p. 367).

Ebony Rose (2019) pointed out, the process is to both extract the various languages, knowledges, and cultural systems of these populations, and then to destroy these artifacts, as if they never existed. Academic language is a continual attack on Indigenous knowledge. This is done in history and literature textbooks (p. 33).

Therefore, academic English language is a plausible site of interrogation for consequential schooling outcomes for Black youth, as Toni Morrison expressed, "He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language, not even know that 'hip' is a real word or that 'the dozens' meant something. This is a really cruel fallout of racism" (as cited in LeClair, 1981, p. 124).

If we can now see academic English language to be a construct of governance, a product of settler colonialism operating as a foundation and pillar for policy implementation, curriculum design, and pedagogical approach, (not to exclude citizenship and basic human rights) academic English language proximity to whiteness as property connects with Baldwin's (Baldwin & Peck, 2017) position in the film documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, noting that whiteness is simply a metaphor for power. Academic English language can no longer disguise itself as a tool for attaining freedom. What is clear is that the academic English language is a coded system used to measure, configure, categorize, and marginalize, and is ostensibly snarled to the socio-political agendas that exalt labor over love, production over holistic wellness, and war over peace. Therefore, the construct of academic English language within a society that benefits from "a citizenry which will simply obey the rules" (Baldwin, 2008, p. 679) is the crux of literacy attainment, and, "Not too many people wanted to grant that maybe schools really are political institutions teaching power to the powerful and something unpalatable and self-destructive to the weak" (Jordan, 2003/ 2009, p. 218).

The focus on academic English language and its impact on Black cognition is situated in middle-grade Language Arts classrooms due to my experience as a language arts teacher in Florida, Texas, and Georgia, and my knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of English Language Arts (ELA) curricula in U.S. public schools. During my fourteen years as a classroom teacher, I agree with Smitherman (1973) when they stated, "[Black language] BL speaking students. They are already bi-dialectal. They use different forms of speech when talking to different people. Sometimes consciously, more often intuitively, they take cognizance of the situational context and style-shift accordingly" (p. 775), therefore how is it that American educational institutions and networks still memorialize their lore about Black literacy capabilities, which is "faulty, invalid, imprecise, spurious, specious, and just plain full of shit" (Smitherman, 2017, p. 502)? And more to the point, how can

we, justice-oriented educators engender educative spaces for Black youth where creative and linguistic justice praxis attend to the cognitive consequences of the ongoing literacy war?

Thus, I present a conceptual lesson project as an entry point to exploring Black cognition in the present-day educational context and to expand the research and inform policies to center Black, critical and creative literacy practices. This project is grounded in concepts of "unhobble" as praxis and creative method for interference release; guided by Toni Morrison's awareness, "in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language and the work of the writers do to hobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting and definitive," (Morrison, 1992, p. 12-13) "I am keenly aware of the fact that I write in a wholly racialized society that can and does hobble the imagination," "excavating the credibility of the sources of the imagination; not the nature of the imagination" (Morrison 1995, p. 93); "I wanted my imagination as unencumbered as possible and as responsible as possible" (Morrison, 2019, n.p).

Conceptual Lesson Project

This conceptual lesson project builds upon an assignment completed in African American Rhetoric, taught by Dr. Kevin Browne at Syracuse University, which explored creative interpretations of the importance of African American rhetoric. Analyzing the composition process of the visual essay, different questions emerged regarding my imaginative output. These questions sought clarity of my choices, and to one, notice, and two, investigate the constraints hobbling my imagination, even within an artistic expression centering Black (re)memory, defined in this conceptual lesson design as a revisit and exploration of what is and can be remembered, or previously known; told. The results from the reflexive inquiry practice led me to create another visual essay utilizing what I learned from the first project. Key components I observed while making the second visual essay were an intentional awareness of imagination output, related to, yet different from meta-cognition in the degree of criticality; a meta-level critical discourse analysis, elucidating other possibilities; and the responsibility of critical imagination. Currently, I use these observations as guiding posts, not categories of measurement, potentially grounding principles.

Through imposed and un/conscious silences, Black youth learners experience a distinct "weathering" (Cogburn, 2019) when schooled via "structural, political, and representational aspects of violence" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Toni Morrison (1993) made clear in their Nobel Prize for Literature Lecture that we should not take language lightly because, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge, it limits knowledge." Therefore, this conceptual lesson project binds academic English language as a metonymy for oppressive language and makes visible how Black imagination grounded in an authentic, critical exploration of memory (diasporic) can be cared for and developed through the process of project-based learning, in the form of a virtual essay that challenges the gatekeeping and harm done by academic English language.

Anticipated Outcome

Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Proficiency level descriptors to assess students' ability to locate and interpret varying scales of information and its sources, to analyze diverse ranges of texts and contexts, and imagine/innovate solutions and resources for

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current and future dispositions of self and community creates alternative framing and baselines for Black youth literacy capabilities and practice. Furthermore, as an inquiry-based model sustainable through a multi-unit and multimodal instruction, we can steer ourselves through to answer the question, how does critical thinking pivot when Black youth are the source of knowledge and voice in their language arts instruction? Critical creative thinking is a cognitive ability necessary for cultivating equitable and just futures. In its entirety, this conceptual lesson project possesses the potential to bring together community members, educators, and researchers to discuss the significance and plan the development of imagination as a critical literacy for Black youth and Black futures.

Method/Praxis

Lesson Project Title: Critical Imagination & Context Analysis
Broader Context Question: How can imagination support my critical thinking abilities?

Table 1. Sample Learning Goals that Integrate Middle Grade New York State Standards for ELA, English Language Development

- (*Reading informational **(RI)** or literary texts (**RL**)*)

Activity: Students develop critical, creative awareness of narrative composition and its process
Critical Thinking Concepts: Recurring Themes, Sequencing, Context, Logic & Reasoning
Critical Imagination & Context Analysis

Reading & Analyzing (Creative, Critical Thinking)
New York State Standards fused with Computational and Design Language Connections

Computational Language	**Literary Design Thinking**
Input	Write (recreate) narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, relevant descriptive details, and clear sequencing.
Decomposition	Determine one or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; summarize a text. (RI&RL)
Pattern Recognition/Representation	Cite textual evidence to strongly support an analysis of what the text says explicitly/implicitly and make logical inferences. (RI&RL)
Abstraction / Generalization	Conduct research to answer questions, including self-generated questions, drawing on multiple sources, and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate. Generate additional related questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
Evaluation and Logic	Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear [articulation].

Students are to make a 5–7-minute short film illustrating a contextualized theme *(e.g. learning, living, becoming, discovery/wonder)*

This project-based learning activity is designed to align at the end of a mix-genre literary analysis (fiction & non-fiction) unit

Materials:	A journal/notebook; stock video clips/access to a royal-free content website, or content owned by students; ear/headphones for editing; any video/photo editing software (there are many free/low-cost options available).
Helpful Guidelines:	● Align the overall theme to the broader topic of the unit. ● Establish a subject(s) of focus for the project. ● Review and provide reference of literary elements and concepts. ● Distinguish types of dialogue ● Revisit and provide reference to types of scene sequences to be included: ● Simple, Compound, Complex, and Compound-complex; Poetry
Proposed Timeline	3-4 Weeks: Visual Essay Composition (4-5 day/week)
Projected Directions/Sessions:	● **Session One:** Students select and arrange their video footage in folders. (Thematic categorizing) ● **Session Two:** Students continue to select video footage and add sound effects, clips, and music. (Symbolism, motifs, signs) ● **Session Three:** Students are to begin their pre-production storyboard: A Day of planning and playing. (distinct patterns and representation) ● **Session Four- Seven:** Students are to spend concentrated time crafting their visual essay. ● **Session Eight:** Students are to write a reflection about their experience crafting their essay; conversations with the creator. (Generalizations and abstractions) ● **Session Nine-Ten:** Students are to analyze their visual essay using the critical imagination reflexive practice guideposts. (Evaluation and logic) ● **Session Eleven - Fourteen:** Whole class film viewing, analysis, and dialogue. (dissemination, collective inquiry, and expression)

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