Upending Colonial Practices: Toward Repairing Harm in English Education

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This article briefly reviews the colonial roots of English education in the United States and outlines current practices that perpetuate harm in the lives of students of color in K-12 schools. Through an examination of theoretical scholarship and empirical research related to repairing the harm invoked by colonizing English education practices, the authors collectively build on Winn's (2013) call for researchers to imagine and engage in practices of restorative teacher education within specific area groups. Drawing on their collective research experiences, the authors highlight practices that support the reparative, restorative, and humanizing literacy pedagogies necessary for 21st century schools, with the aim of deepening knowledge and practices that advance "restorative English education".

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We write this article as current and former classroom teachers, scholars, and educators committed to transformative justice. As participants in the "Toward a Transformative Justice Teacher Education" convening funded by The Spencer Foundation at the University of California, Davis in 2017, we reflected on and collectively imagined restorative and transformative justice in teacher education. Specifically, we took up the urgent question: How might we teach English Language Arts (ELA) in the context of "hyper incarceration" (Rodriguez, 2016) and the ongoing criminalization of Indigenous, Black,

Latinx, Brown, differently abled, undocumented, and Asian Pacific Islander and Muslim bodies (Winn, 2018)? We imagined using ELA to disrupt and stop the systematic dehumanization of bodies of color (Winn, 2018). This article represents a response to Winn's (2013) call to (re)imagine ELA education as a tool that repairs centuries-long harm emerging from and perpetuated by English education onto racially and linguistically minoritized US communities.

We see teaching, learning, and justice as mutually constitutive. Collectively we have experience teaching ELA and other literacy courses in middle or high schools and teacher education, while others have tangential relationships with the field of English education. We strive, collectively, to build knowledge and promote practices, spaces, and imaginaries that advance reparative, restorative, and humanizing 21st century literacy instruction. Toward that end, we acknowledge the extant linguistic racism in our schools and briefly review literature that explores the colonial history of English education. We subsequently explain why we define restorative justice not as a program, but as a philosophy, and conclude with an overview of empirical literature, along with examples of policies and practices that support restorative English education.

Acknowledging Linguistic Racism

Through our own distinct experiences and scholarship we recognize that Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander communities have turbulent experiences with schooling, and with ELA settings specifically (Camangian, 2015; De La Luz Reyes, 1992; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2010; Martinez, 2017). Wortham and Reyes (2011) contend that "educational processes establish associations between 'educated' and 'uneducated,' 'sophisticated' and 'unsophisticated,' 'official' and 'vernacular' language use and, accordingly, types of students." (p. 184). We recognize that how students of color *do* school in ELA contexts often mark and stigmatize them as

"types of students" because their cultural, linguistic, and literate practices do not always align with the practices privileged in schools. However, numerous scholars agree that they need not align and it is no longer acceptable to relegate students of color for not performing and sounding like their white middle-class counterparts (Paris & Alim, 2014; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

We echo Flores and Rosa's (2015) stance against "appropriate-based approaches" to language education that fail to disrupt underlying racism that sanctions certain language practices as "standard" or "academic," noting that these terms must be understood as "language ideologies rather than discrete linguistic practices" (p. 152). Teaching students that the ability to "switch" between "home languages" and "appropriate languages" can lead to academic success disregards the material realities of white supremacy (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Flores and Rosa argue that raciolinguistic ideologies "produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (2015, p. 150). It has been our experience that youth of color are, indeed, often construed as "linguistically deviant" by the white gaze/listener, irrespective of the linguistic forms produced (Martinez, 2017).

In dismantling racial and linguistic stigmatization of students of color, we affirm Winn's (2013) claim that restorative English education is an urgent need as it calls for educators to:

> resist zero-tolerance policies that sort, label, and eventually isolate particular youth, embracing a discourse of restoration in which all young people have an opportunity to experience "radical healing" through engaging in deliberate literate acts that illuminate pathways of resilience. (p. 127)

Beyond acknowledging ELA classrooms as sites of ongoing racialization, ELA educators must also understand the historical contours of harm inflicted by our field and recognize how these legacies continue to impact our classrooms and students.

Tracing the Colonial Roots of English Education

Internationally, scholars have traced the history of English education to racist, violent beginnings. Pennycook (2017) notes that Britain felt a "moral imperative" to "civilize the world" (p. 74) and expand Anglicist "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) by hierarchizing English as superior to local languages. According to Brutt-Griffler (2002), "English education was reserved for the colonial elite and kept safely out of the reach of the vast majority of the population of British colonies throughout the history of its colonial empire" (p. x). Today, the status of English as "the world language" is a direct outcome of British linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999) coupled with access limitations that maintain structures of inequality (Pennycook, 2017). This colonial history is no differently calcified in the US. In its first century as a settler nation-state, the US rose to power as an aggressive expansionist force where "with each successive territorial conquest, annexation, and acquisition" Indigenous and other language minoritized communities were colonized and "incorporated into the US polity" (Wiley & Lukes, 1996, p. 523). This led to monolingual English ideology determining the linguistic, racial, and sociopolitical standing of Indigenous communities and communities of color.

English as a school subject in the US became inscribed over a century ago (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008), rendering invisible hundreds of longstanding Indigenous languages spoken prior to the arrival of settler colonialists (Zepeda & Hill, 1991). Until the 1970s, American Indian children were subjected to forced assimilation in English-only Americanization boarding schools wherein punitive, physically violent, and dehumanizing school practices were utilized in the name of teaching English (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

For enslaved Africans forcibly brought to the United States in the 17th century, literacy education was forbidden from the time of enslavement (Anderson, 1988), and those who survived the Middle Passage were immediately separated by language to deter any communication or organizing (Baugh, 1999). All this time, African Americans have continued to endure their language practices being routinely surveilled, policed, and corrected. Like their African American peers, Latinx students have been subjected to both de jure and de facto schooling segregation (Orfield, 2004) and their bi/multilingualism has been erroneously seen as an impediment to their learning and meaning-making in ELA classrooms (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017).

The origins of English as a school subject have been traced to a group of professors known as the Committee of 10, who foregrounded what they deemed as "literary masterpieces and judicious training in correct expression" (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008, p. 64). The Committee's conceptualization of English education was further developed by the College of English (1893–1925), and related ideologies have been used as the basis for academic English tracking; the Conference of English recommended "holding some children back in school (or testing them out) because their English usage was considered 'unclear' or 'incorrect'" (Wiley & Lukes, 1996, p. 526). While English is viewed as a universally teachable subject, racialized "do's and don'ts" are reinforced and maintained through standardization processes (Smitherman, 1999).

ELA classrooms continue to be "gatekeepers" (Wiley & Lukes, 1996) where harm is often enacted on linguistically minoritized children (Martinez, 2017). Dominant understandings of English education make available "only questions of linguistic structure and decontextualized teaching practices" (Pennycook, 2017, p. 142). Language diversity in the US is seen an "imported" result of immigration (Wiley & Lukes, 1996), rather than a ubiquitous result of colonial exploitation. Restorative English education draws attention to these histories and the persistent "policing, surveillance, and exclusion of particular youth" (Winn, 2013, p. 133), with the aim "not to reject English, but to reconstitute it in more inclusive, ethical, and democratic

terms" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 2). This process includes equipping teachers with stances that situate literacy as a political act (Freire, 1970) and works toward social transformation that can "lead people well in the struggle for liberation" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 19).

Restorative Justice In Education

We consider restorative justice (RJ) to mean the philosophy of cultivating right relationships so that when harm occurs we seek to restore collectively rather than punish individually. A restorative justice philosophy builds and sustains relationships within community so that when we respond to harm, we focus on the needs and obligations of those who have suffered and committed it. Citing work from New Zealand youth justice conferences, Zehr (2015) writes that RJ must respond both to "the harms and needs of victims" and "whatever is happening in the young offenders' lives that is contributing to their offending" (p. 236). While RJ is a relatively recent approach in US schools, teachers and elders have advocated philosophies and processes of repairing harm for thousands of years (Pranis, 2012; Zehr, 2015). In applying RJ to teacher education, we honor this tradition and the stolen lands on which we practice it.

Responding to what Davis (2016) calls our "interrelatedness" and Pranis (2012) terms our "interconnectedness," RJ attends to the fact that we are, always and everywhere, in relationship with one other. Classrooms, teams, clubs, academic departments, and schools are built of relationships. Occasionally, these relationships are fractured, and RJ enables educators to resist exclusionary discipline practices (referrals; suspension; expulsion) which we know neither repair relationships nor improve academic achievement (Yang, 2008). When we suspend and expel young people from our schools, they do not vanish. They are not gone. They have merely been displaced.

Many teachers, schools, and districts have been using RJ philosophies to decrease racialized rates of suspension and expulsion. Crucially, we maintain that RJ cannot be treated as a suspension-alternative "program" that simply reacts to harm and massages suspension-rates. The aforementioned practitioners remind us that RJ must represent what Baliga (2015) calls a radical reframing "away from a justice of sides toward a justice that heals" (p. 11). In order to take up RJ philosophy in their classrooms and schools, educators need training, practice, and commitment to a new/old vision of justice that seeks, above all, to repair harm and respond to the needs the harm has created. Until we envision RJ as healing and lifting for all, with obligations for everyone, RJ "programs" will fail to build the community necessary to respond to harm in healing, humanizing ways, and RJ in education will remain subordinate to dominant ideologies of punishment and power.

The commitment to a RJ paradigm that acknowledges harms and obligations "asks that each one of us recognize and affirm the importance and interconnectedness of history, race, justice, and language" (Winn, 2018, p. 32). Winn (2018) advances four pedagogical stances – History Matters; Race Matters; Justice Matters; Language Matters – educators may take up in order to teach in ways that embody and enact RJ. When teachers teach histories of colonization, enslavement, and anti-Blackness; when they clarify that race is a social construction, while racism is embedded in the US political economy; when they interrogate multiple conceptions of justice (Tuck & Yang, 2018) and, with their students, ask "*justice for whom?*"; and when they attend to the power of language in shaping our biases and commitments, then they are embracing the pedagogies of RJ.

Advancing A Restorative English Education

We concur with Pennycook's (1995) call for "a critical paradigm that acknowledges human agency and looks not only at how people's lives are regulated by language, culture, and discourse but also at

how people both resist those forms and produce their own forms" (p. 48). As we imagine a restorative English education, we want to recognize that youth of color are vulnerable to hegemonic ideologies that permeate the creative discourses they produce, and supports them in naming their own realities in ways that disrupt existing social orders (Camangian, 2015). In this vein, we discuss the emerging trend of activist-oriented scholars reclaiming English education with a more anti-racist, anti-colonial, and critical Ethnic Studies vision.

These following transformative bodies of research explicitly challenge dominant perspectives and curricula that privilege white, middle-class perspectives and work to amplify the humanity and strengths of students of color in English education: critical language pedagogy (Alim, 2005; Baker-Bell, 2013), racial literacy development (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Skerrett, 2011), Black girl literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), hip-hop literacies (Kelly, 2013; Love, 2015), spoken word pedagogies (Jocson, 2005), critical and critical race English education (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017; Morrell, 2005), language ideologies (Martínez, 2010), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014), translanguaging (García et al., 2017), critical literacies (Camangian, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2010), civics-informed ELA (Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015), Ethnic Studies approaches to ELA (San Pedro, 2015: Thomas, 2017), and critical translingual approaches (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). We deem these last 2 orientations especially promising to restorative ELA classrooms, and will thus explore them in greater detail.

Collectively these scholars challenge the hegemony of what counts as English language and English education, and importantly acknowledge and make clear the harm imposed by traditional ELA teaching practices.

Ethnic studies approaches to ELA

Ethnic Studies begins with the assumption that racism and settler colonialism are strong social and cultural forces in US society (Du Bois, 1903; Omi & Winant, 1994; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Ethnic Studies—related fields include Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latinx Studies—center colonialism, racism, and racialization as the primary terrain of academic inquiry and interrogate the de/construction of racial projects. Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory posits that "race" is a socially constructed and culturally represented phenomenon steeped in racial projects of western hegemony. This framework is helpful for deconstructing social institutions, like schools, as "racial projects" where racial categories are both reified and contested.

Ethnic Studies approaches to ELA are not simply about the inclusion of literature by writers of color or the celebration that people of color also have/had "heroes and 'great' civilizations" (Okihiro, 2016, p. 150). Rather, these approaches foreground anti-colonial perspectives of US literature, history, and culture, highlighting processes of (anti)imperialism and (anti) racism in and through literacy instruction. These foci continue the activist spirit of the students, parents, educators, and community members in the San Francisco Bay Area that demanded the inclusion of histories, curricula, and pedagogies of the oppressed (Freire, 1970) —beyond multiculturalism—in educational institutions in 1968. This social movement, The Third World Liberation Front, advanced an anti-racist educational agenda to upend centuries of colonial education for "third world" communities in the US (Okihiro, 2016).

Scholarship on Ethnic Studies approaches to ELA has explored the reparative possibilities of racially-affirming literacy instruction. Acosta (2007) and de los Ríos (2018) have focused on bi/multilingual Chicanx/Latinx anti-colonial literary genres in literacy instruction, and Thomas (2017) examined racially diverse students enrolled in a Black Studies course that explored race and racialization through Black cultural and literary texts. Similarly, San Pedro (2015) researched culturally sustaining pedagogies in a Native American literature course that aimed to challenge stereotypes by reframing Native American students' use of silence as a form of

critical silent literacy. Such spaces aim to equip students with rigorous literacy skills *and* critically examine and disrupt institutional racism. While not all ELA teachers will have the opportunity to teach an Ethnic Studies course, ELA teachers *can* become emerged in Ethnic Studies frameworks by

- Using literary and historical texts from Indigenous communities and communities of color that center and historicize notions of power, racialization, and (anti)colonialism.
- Incorporating alternative primary sources from Indigenous communities and communities of color that provide counternarratives and highlight people of color's struggles for self-determination and liberation.

Critical Translingual Approaches to ELA

Recent re-conceptualizations of language have resulted in broader understandings of students' communicative assets and abilities and reframed bi/multilingualism as commonplace (Canagarajah, 2012). ELA teachers have reimagined instruction in ways that engage the rich semiotic and linguistic repertoires their students bring to classrooms, especially as they translanguage, fluidly blending multiple modes of communication (García et al., 2017).

Building on the prior work of Canagarajah (2012), critical translingual approaches in ELA classrooms (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018) are essential to restorative English education because they are grounded in critical literacy and the "multilingual turn" (May, 2014), an epistemological shift that continues to dispute monolingualism as the norm. A critical translingual approach to ELA extends translanguaging theory and practice (García et al., 2017) so that *all* language minoritized students—including those who would not commonly be viewed as bi/multilingual—are encouraged to share their diverse language practices and critique language ideologies that deficitizes their practices. This means designing ELA instruction that allows room for students'

linguistic expertise and simultaneously encourages them to think critically about "how language is used and, importantly, how language can be used against them" (Alim, 2005, p. 28). For example, Seltzer and de los Ríos (2018) notes,

> Through reading, writing and multimodal text production, students can put their (socio)linguistic inquiry to work in ways that challenge ideologies of linguistic separateness and standardization. In this way, English teachers can hone the linguistic creativity that students of color already bring with them—the "blending, merging, [and] meshing" that make up their languaging (Young, 2009, p. 72)—and encourage students to use that creativity in writing to challenge the coloniality and racism that inform English [classrooms]. (p. 51)

As ELA educators increasingly accept bi/multilingualism as ubiquitous, critical translingual orientations are imperative for upending colonial practices that have previously disparaged the language practices of students of color.

We propose the following for practice when emphasizing the transgressive nature of translanguaging (see Seltzer & de Los Ríos, 2018):

- Using translanguaging beyond a scaffold for teaching English and through the use of multilingual/multimodal texts that promote critical metalinguistic awareness.
- Challenging the idea of English as a bounded, discrete subject: We encourage ELA teachers to 1) look toward disciplines outside of English, particularly Ethnic Studies, and 2) to reconsider what counts as language in the ELA classroom.
- Extending translanguaging theory and practice to all language minoritized students.

Conclusion

Fervent white nationalism, religious and linguistic intolerance, and anti-immigrant and racist discourses characterize our current

sociopolitical landscape. These forces are, without a doubt, influencing the present and future of English education by advancing reductive policies and practices. At these crossroads, ELA educators have a social responsibility to stand in solidarity with marginalized students and work toward establishing justice that heals (Baliga, 2015). The aforementioned pedagogies "[employ] literature and writing to seek justice and restore (and, in some cases, create) peace that reaches beyond the classroom walls" (Winn, 2013, p. 126). ELA educators must begin and continue to embrace these practices to respond effectively to students' needs and repair the harm extant in English education.

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Additional Resources

1. Cuautin, R.T., Zavala, M., Sleeter, C., Au, W. (2019). *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Publication.

A comprehensive edited volume on the teaching of K-12 ethnic studies in the United States.

2. Lyiscott, J. (2014). Jamila Lyiscott: 3 ways to speak English [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila_lyiscott_3_ways_to_speak_english?language=en

Lyiscott's spoken-word essay celebrates her fluid language practices and identities while simultaneously critiquing language ideologies.

3. Mirra, N., Coffey, J., & Englander, A. (2018). Warrior scholars and bridge builders: Civic dreaming in ELA classrooms. *Journal of Literacy Research*. doi: 10.1177/1086296X18784335

Authors demonstrate how ELA classes can be crucial sites for civic education.

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