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To Shed Love and Light on Blackness: An Interview with Dr. Lamar Johnson

by Carlin Borsheim-Black



Dr. Lamar Johnson



**Carlin
Borsheim-Black**

As I write this introduction, in March 2021, Derek Chauvin is currently standing trial for the murder of George Floyd in 2020. We are still demanding justice for the death of Breonna Taylor. And we are standing in solidarity with Asian American and Pacific Islanders following the recent mass murder of eight Asian American women in Atlanta. It should not have taken these (and many, many other) instances of racial violence to shed light on the urgency of antiracist education. At the same time, as a result, more and more Michigan literacy educators are acknowledging a need to be antiracist in their teaching, as well as in their own lives.

And, of course, we know that our own classrooms are not immune to systemic racism. We, as Michigan literacy educators, are all implicated in the racial disparities we see in outcomes across our state. We need to do a better job of teaching about and honoring the languages and literacies that Black and Brown youth bring to our classrooms; we need to do a better job of interrupting white of literature curriculum by foregrounding BIPOC authors in our text selections; we need to do a better job of building on the funds of knowledge of all Michigan families and communities; we need to do a better job of being overtly antiracist in our teaching. And, as the editors of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, we need to do a better job of supporting Michigan literacy educators in this work.

To those ends, we are committed to showcasing contributions of BIPOC scholars and educators who are making a difference in antiracist literacy education today. Recently, I (Carlin) had the honor of interviewing Dr. Lamar Johnson about his forthcoming book *Critical Race English Education: New Visions, New Possibilities* (Routledge), which outlines his approach for teaching for racial justice in literacy classrooms. Dr. Johnson is Associate Professor of Language and Literacy for Linguistic and Racial Diversity in the Department of English at Michigan State University. In addition to preparing future English teachers to teach for racial justice, Dr. Johnson is also a television and movie writer and producer.

The following reflects excerpts from the one-hour interview I conducted with Dr. Johnson. The transcript has been edited for clarity and concision.

In a recent article published in *English Education* (2018), you described yourself as a “survivor of the traditional model of school.” I found that phrase to be very powerful. Could you unpack what surviving the traditional model of school meant for you or what it continues to mean for other Black youth today?

I grew up in a small town of Edgefield, South Carolina,

forty-five hundred people. We all pretty much went to the same school; my teachers were part of the community, people who my mom and dad had as teachers and who went to school with my grandma and great aunts. They taught in a very traditional way, whether they were white or Black. They were teaching from how they were taught. I remember learning grammar in fourth grade, about nouns, pronouns and punctuation. I remember learning grammar like, “If you speak this way, you’re wrong”—particularly if you speak Black language. I had gone through all of my schooling up into college thinking that if I spoke this way, that it was wrong. I didn’t know Black language was a real language—let’s be real about it.

I also encountered racism in school. I was disinvited to a birthday party my fifth-grade year by a white woman who actually taught me as a second grader. Her son and I were the same age, in the same class. He invited me to a birthday party—and then he also disinvited me and some other Black students in the class that same week. There were only five or six other Black people in our class, but his mom knew all of us because she taught us as second graders. And so being disinvited to a social event hit me in a very different way. I was hurt by that. I had never experienced racism, to my knowledge, in that way. In school, we learned about enslavement and racism, but it made it sound like something from the past, like this doesn’t happen now. Sometimes you buy into what people are teaching you at school. And then this happens? You can’t come to his birthday party because of the color of your skin. I remember my mom asking her, “How can you behave like this when you are a teacher?” I knew then I didn’t do anything wrong. I thought I had done something wrong, honestly, to be disinvited. There was a lot of spirit murdering going on.

I felt like a survivor because at any moment I could have been like a lot of my other peers who were checking out. A lot of my cousins talk about how they checked out as students. I didn’t check out because of my home life experiences. My mom had me at the age of 17. When I was in school, my mom was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. I could see how she was trying to make it right and trying to raise me and my

sister. She remarried, so I had my step dad. I saw my dad, and I knew that he did not graduate high school. And even as a kid, I was like, “That can’t be me, that can’t be my story.” So, regardless of what teachers were telling me, I did it. I read all those white books. I was reading *Sarah Plain and Tall* and *The Boxcar Children*—all these white books, because I felt like I had to.

Then in seventh-grade, I finally had a Black teacher who understood me. She introduced me to culturally relevant teaching. It hit me differently. As a seventh grader, I was able to say, “I want to be a teacher. I want to be like Ms. Sharonda Ryans, and I want to teach English Language Arts, and this how I want to teach it.” Since the seventh grade, I knew I wanted to be a teacher because I actually engaged with a teacher who actually taught me the love of learning. I also knew then that I didn’t want to be like those other teachers who I had in the past.

You have developed an approach to literacy teaching, Critical Race English Education (CREE), and you have recently written a book to introduce CREE to the world. Could you describe CREE for our readers?

The book is called *Critical Race English Education: New Visions, New Possibilities*, because that’s how I look at it—we’ve got to envision this world that we hope to see and envision new possibilities. One of my mentors, Dr. Gloria Boutte, always asked, “Do you believe in the possibility of the Black child?” We have to ask ourselves that. Anything is possible when you believe in the possibility of the Black child.

And so, CREE sheds light and love on the Black literacies and the Black language that Black students bring to school spaces. The reason why Black kids are being spiritually murdered in the streets but also in classrooms is because many people don’t understand Blackness. If we begin to shed love and light on Blackness, we begin to push back against anti-Black racism, linguistic violence, symbolic violence, curricular and pedagogical violence that happens in these spaces. When I created CREE, it began to shed love and light on Blackness, on beauty in Blackness because that’s what I didn’t get in school.

CREE is about centering the Black literacies that Black students bring into classrooms to push back against whiteness and white supremacy, to decenter whiteness while centering Blackness. Like my advisor, Dr. David Kirkland, says, to deny Black folks their language and literacy practices is also to deny their humanity. And so, CREE asks, “Are we speaking from the Black radical imagination to see things through the Black gaze or are we seeing things through the white gaze,” which is what most teachers actually practice.

Toni Morrison talks about the white literary imagination, how a lot of the books, the lessons we learn reflect this white way of existing, being, speaking, and moving in the world. For example, racism is embedded in the English language. We see Blackness as something that is evil, that is bad. You can say “a little white lie.” It’s okay to tell a white lie, because it’s pure. But we say, “black sheep” or “the black plague.” All those names are bad and evil. But in Africa, the Black sun represents something very positive; the Black water represents something very positive. We don’t get to hear those stories. I think we really need to (re)define what Blackness means. We need to meditate on what Blackness is and what Blackness ain’t. And CREE does just that. If we decenter the white literary imagination and use the Black imagination, I think we can also begin to center the humanity of Black students.

Of course, CREE also looks at the Black Lives Matter movement and the physical violence that happens in communities. We can’t get it twisted—the reason why Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown, the reason why Breonna Taylor was killed, the reason why George Floyd was killed, and Trayvon Martin, and list goes on and on—was because those people were coming from the white imagination. We saw teachers in New York saying “blue lives matter.” We see messages on text threads calling students the n-word. That stuff is out there, and these people are also teaching Black and Brown students. And when those things happen, it perpetuates spiritual murder and physical violence. CREE challenges those things.

You explained that CREE foregrounds, emphasizes,

celebrates Black literacies. Can you describe an example of what that looks like, maybe something you’ve taught that you really love?

In my *English Journal* (2017) piece, I share an example of using Beyonce and Jay Z’s song “Black Effect,” (2018) off their album, *Everything Is Love*. They center Blackness in that song; they talk about why being Black is beautiful and why they wouldn’t want to be anything else. It’s also very historical—they give historical references. They are singers, but they are also scholars, they are storytellers, they are writers. You can do a lesson analyzing this text. They use literary devices. They use a lot of metaphors and similes and allusions. You still have your standards. You still hit on literary devices. Metaphor doesn’t change; it’s always a metaphor, whether Drake uses it, Beyonce, or Walt Whitman—a metaphor does not change.

You also could do a lesson on Black language. For example, in the song they say “I’m good on any MLK Boulevard.” That’s Black language. MLK Boulevard, Malcolm X Boulevard, or Rosa Park Boulevard, those are real Black communities, often poor communities. Beyonce and Jay-Z have money but they say, “We’re good on any MLK Boulevard, because we’re still Black and class does not trump race.”

You could also do a lesson to tie this song to Angi Thomas and *The Hate U Give* (2017). They talk about MLK in that book. They talk about Black Jesus. They use Black language. I have an activity where I put those two texts in conversation with one another around Black language. I give students a chart and the features of Black language. Students look at “Black Effect” to find the habitual be, signifyin’, and cultural references. Then they do the same for *The Hate U Give*. I ask them to explain how this use of Black language impacts the meaning of the text.

As you’re talking about this, I am thinking that so much about how you enact CREE is an extension of who you are, of your identity as a Black man and your knowledge of Black culture. At the same time, at least 85 percent of the teachers in Michigan are

white women. Is CREE the same for white teachers? What work do white teachers need to do to enact CREE?

My white teacher candidates say, “I’m having a hard time thinking about a lesson or activity I can do.” They can put together a text set, but when it comes to actually teaching this stuff they’re kind of scared because they also know, “I got to do my deep work. I can’t just stand here and teach about the Black Lives Matter movement and what happened in *All American Boys* without going there.” It’s different for *me* to talk about it as opposed to them to talk about it. They have to do the deep soul work and be honest. You probably won’t know how to begin to celebrate Blackness if you haven’t done your own soul work. But also, you probably won’t know how to begin to celebrate Blackness, if you’re not in tune with Black culture or any culture outside of your own, to be quite honest with you.

I think about bell hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy—when you bring yourself, your whole self, into the classroom space, it makes you vulnerable. When I’m teaching, I don’t detach myself. My students can tell you I was disinvited to a birthday party. I give them examples from my life so they can hear what it means when you really utilize CREE outside of just doing the standards. You have to be vulnerable, and you have to do the deep internal work, too.

And, I think what you’re asking is, how can white teachers teach Black students about something like Black language when Black students speak it already. It’s not about you *teaching* them Black language—they already know that. It is about needing to affirm them. And, I think it is about white teachers needing to talk about how whiteness and white people, people “who look like me,” uphold standard American English. And be vulnerable with them. Students appreciate when you’re vulnerable with them. When I was teaching high school, I was very much vulnerable with my students and that’s how I could make connections with them. You can’t do CREE and not be vulnerable. You have to center yourself.

In the book, I describe a racial storytelling assignment that asks you to think about how your past, present, and future voices are always in complicated dialogue with one another. How does your past experience with racism shape your present moment and your future? You have to do that soul work. When I have teacher candidates engage in racial storytelling upfront, then when we get to teaching and CREE three weeks later, they’re ready for it. They’ve begun the soul work. They can see, “I’ve taken my past moments when I’ve engaged in anti-Blackness, and I’ve looked at these things through a critical race lens to analyze my own experiences.” Then, we can move forward talking about teaching. I don’t think you can do CREE if you don’t do the deep soul work first.

And, too, if you feel like you don’t know, there are *so* many articles and books out there about white people teaching in this way. You go on YouTube and find examples. The resources are out there. You just got to do it at this point.

While it should not have taken us this long to get here, it seems like we were at a moment, following George Floyd’s death and Breonna Taylor’s death, where many literacy educators are feeling a sense of urgency about anti-racist education. And they may be looking for ways to honor or renew their commitment to making Black lives matter in the classroom. What’s the relationship you see between literacy education and activism?

Since the beginning of time, since our ancestors were enslaved, they’ve always used literacy, Black language, and activism. Think about the songs they used, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* or *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. Those songs are using Black language and literacy skills to escape to freedom. They used coded language to speak to one another so that the enslavers wouldn’t know what was going on. We can fast forward throughout time and think about during the Black power movement, the civil rights movement, “No justice, no peace.” Those things speak back to white supremacy and humanize Black folks.

With the Black Lives Matter movement, Black literacies are central to people protesting. And you see people say, “You about to lose your job, you about to lose your job.” They’re speaking back to systemic issues and anti-Blackness by using their language and literacy tools. You can’t talk about Black Lives Matter movement without talking about Black literacies.

And I think we can be creative in how we bring it into the classroom. When I was teaching high school, I had a student whose name was also Trayvon. One particular day, he spoke up, he asked, “Have you heard about the death of Trayvon Martin?” I hadn’t heard about that at that time. The other students started to say, “Yeah, that’s messed up. I heard about that.” I had to stop teaching. I pulled up CNN and decided, “Let’s look up CNN.” And that’s what we did. I changed my teaching right in that moment. We talked about it. And then I went home and said, “OK, let me begin to revise some things. I’m going to put this text on hold for right now. Maybe we can do *Black Boy* by Richard Wright right now and bring in this Trayvon Martin situation, and we will do expository writing, and we’ll write letters to the school board and to the legislature about what is going on with gun violence and how they are killing Black people.” And that’s what we did. I taught them expository writing. That wasn’t part of my unit; I had to be willing to switch some things up. If I hadn’t done that, I could have been perpetuating racial violence. Those students wanted to talk about that. And so, I think right now, in our current moment, you have to talk about the present-day justice movement. Black Lives Matter is more than just police brutality. It’s also about education, health care, and the humanity of Black folks. And also shedding love and light on the beauty of Blackness and what it means to be Black.

When I think about literacy and Black language and activism, I think those things go hand in hand in our current moment. Literacy is an action. It’s something you do, not just something you have. It’s something you do.

There are a lot of communities in Michigan that are very conservative and really don’t see the place for

activism, perhaps especially Black Lives Matter, in the classroom. Teachers feel worried about that if they’re going to get backlash of some sort. How do you respond?

As a teacher, I definitely had some issues with parents, Black and white. This is what we go through, if we do this type of work in the classroom. It is resistance work. You have to be able to resist. I’m not one to back down quickly. I won’t do that, because I’m always seeing myself as that little Black boy who survived that space. He’s always in my ear talking to me. If I *don’t* disrupt, what happens to that little Black boy? But I also know that is not all about me—it’s about our Black and Brown babies. It’s about them. And you know what? If you fire me, there are so many other school districts I can go to. Maybe sometimes it comes to that, but that rarely happens. But we got to know how to resist. We cannot be scared. CREE is a never, ever scared pedagogy. You have to be ready to resist.

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