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Using the White Space to Center Blackness--A Conversation with Guest Editor, Dr. Amir Gilmore

Amir A. Gilmore
Washington State University, amir.gilmore@wsu.edu

Maika Yeigh
Portland State University, myeigh@pdx.edu

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Using the White Space to Center Blackness—A Conversation with Guest Editor, Dr. Amir Gilmore

Abstract

In anticipation of the NWJTE Antiracism Special Issue, the Editorial Board interviewed guest editor, Dr. Amir Gilmore.

Keywords

Anti-racism, Antiracism, Center Blackness

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Maika Yeigh, NWJTE:

Amir, the NWJTE Editorial Board, is thrilled that you are the guest editor for this special issue focused on antiblackness in education. This topic feels more important now than ever before. What brought you to this work to prompt a special issue?

Amir Gilmore:

Thank you so much for inviting me to have this conversation and organizing this special issue for NWJTE on antiblackness. This topic has been and continues to be mightily important—now, then, and in the not-yet future. What brought me to this research were two things: (1) I am a Black man bearing witness to the pervasiveness of antiblackness in the United States and (2), as a Black educator, I care about the beauty, brilliance, the joys, and the survivance of Black people—especially Black children. While I knew what antiblackness felt like as a Black man and Black educator, I did not have the language to articulate the complexities and specificities of Black subjugation until my doctoral program at Washington State University. In my doctoral class on race, identity, and representation, I was fortunate to read Michael J. Dumas’ work on antiblackness and Black social suffering in schools and his co-written piece with kihana miraya ross on BlackCrit. I don’t want to say that I was hooked, but their work gave the language necessary to describe what I experienced and how I felt throughout the years. Their work put me onto the works of Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson, Lewis Gordon, Sylvia Wynter, Tina Campt, and George Yancy. Their work served as an invitation to write and center Blackness. By that same measure, I have invited others to partake and engage in a Black study.

Writing about Black life is such a political act because it becomes the medium where I and others can express and share what it means to be a witness—to *bear witness while Black* in the United States. The United States has often painted Black perspectives and knowledge as illegitimate within the white racial and spatial imaginary. Seemingly, we are viewed to be an “unreliable” witness to our accounts because writing from a place of lived embodied experience makes our testimonies—our so-called “me-search,” biased. Perhaps, it makes us biased—biased towards the truth about what it means to be Black in the United States. To echo the words of Dr. George Yancy, I write out of personal existential context not only because the Black body is a source of knowledge but also, our lived experiences compel us to do so. They compel us to look at our material conditions in this country and the world and demand joy, justice, and humanity. I am compelled to use the white space on the page to center Blackness and Black

humanity and record and illuminate the anti-Black confrontations in education and society.

Black people must contend, combat, and counter against a multi-pronged struggle that is effectively aimed at smothering Black consciousness and Black being. Not only must we fight against the constant erasure and bad-faith attacks on Black socio-cultural knowledge and history, but we also must defend ourselves from the violent and gratuitous assaults levied against Black people's minds, bodies, and spirits from the state and white vigilantes. Antiblackness is nothing new—it is a terror masked as normal, affecting our everyday lives. Antiblackness is more than just racism against Black people—it is an antagonistic relationship that civil society has against Black humanity. In many ways, the societies that we live in, thrive of the disgust, disdain, and oppression of Black life. For example, we know that Black children are more likely to be disciplined, suspended from schools, and referred to special education services. We know that Black women are more likely to die during childbirth than white women. We know that Black people are more likely to grow up in impoverished conditions and twice as likely to be unemployed than white people. We know that the Black median household wealth by 2053 will be \$0 and that Black homeowners are denied mortgages and have their homes appraised for less than their white counterparts. Even when it comes to voting, we know that Black people are more likely to be waiting to vote—10, 11, even 12 hours. And please do not get me started about prisons, incarceration, and the criminal justice system. Despite this nation having renowned researchers and statisticians, everyone shrugs their shoulders: that's just what it is, right? In a country so great, how could these inequities be so pervasive?—be so enduring? There's something deeper there! So, for me and many others, the question becomes why does this country have such disdain—or, as Lewis Gordon proposed, a universal hatred towards Black people? As a Black educator, I have seen, lived through, and teach against this vitriol in K-16 education. It was my lived experiences that brought me to this point with NWJTE.

During the Fall 2020 semester, I was invited to present at the 2020 WACTE (The Washington Association of Colleges for Teacher Education) conference on antiblackness and teacher education programs. Through WACTE, I met Davida Sharpe-Haygood (Pierce College), and I was reunited with LaToya Brackett (University of Puget Sound). LaToya and I worked together on her edited book on television portrayals of Black professionals. My chapter interrogated the instances and notions of antiblackness and color-evasiveness of Black male media-teachers in educational sitcoms such as *The Steve Harvey Show*, *Hanging with Mr. Cooper*, *Smart Guy*, and *Everyone Hates Chris*. It was at WACTE where the academic stars aligned for us. Our presentation on antiblackness and teacher education, provided us many opportunities to speak at different forums. In my mind, I thought about how cool it would be to turn our

presentation into a special issue for a journal. I am grateful that we did, especially now, in this current moment with the bad-faith attacks about Critical Race Theory (CRT) from media pundits, legislators, and school boards. Critical Race Theory exists as a vehicle to explain how Black people have navigated life—a very precarious one in the United States. What is happening now with CRT and what continues to happen to anything that explains Black life is subjected to immense scrutiny and discreditation. To paraphrase the late and great Gil-Scott Heron, this politicization *ain't no new thang, but the same old shit!*

NWJTE:

You write about Black Boy Joy. What intersections are there between antiblackness and Black Boy Joy?

AG:

Yes, I write about Black Boy Joy! It gives me joy to see so many broader conversations emerge about it and seeing all the significant research about it. I am thinking about the documentary *Black Boy*, and the HBO film and edited book by Kwame Mbalia entitled *Black Boy Joy*. All the works named are powerful to understand the depth and complexities of what it means to be a Black boy in a society that does not love your Blackness. I write about Black Boy Joy because I was a Black child. Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson co-wrote an article and said that boyhood does not stop. That idea has remained with me since—the idea of boyhood does simply disappear. My boyhood is here animating this conversation. So, in many ways, I theorize that I was, yet still am, a Black boy.

There are many intersections between antiblackness and Black Boy Joy—or Black boyhood broadly. I do not have the time to unpack them all during this conversation, but I know that many special issue contributors go into depth about it. As a Black educator and a son of a Black mother, I think about the circumstances and conditions that Black parents send their Black kids into school—a place that does not comprehensive center or love Blackness nor Black children. Every day, Black parents voluntarily send their children—their joy—their gift to the world—their future into the hands of a social institution that does not have the intention of educating them. Moreover, I think about the likelihood that their Black children, their Black boys, are seen as ‘The Other,’ ‘The Criminal,’ ‘The Problem.’ The social imagery of Black boys within schools and society reveals how institutions feel about them. What do K-12 teachers—mostly white women—see when they look at a Black boy? Do they see their beauty and brilliance? Do they see their Blackness in all its plurality? How are they assessing them? How are their onto-epistemological views shaping and determining what kinds of occupations are best suited for Black boys? It all matters! Despite

pursuits of, commitments to and investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion educational reforms, so much of schooling and academic achievement is centered on white middle-class standards. Even in schools whose student demographics are majority Black and Brown, their norms, instruction, and governance are still based on white middle-class standards! If you do not believe me, please listen to the podcast *Nice White Parents*. Therefore, when Black boys set foot in a physical or digital classroom; the dynamics of that space are positioned against them, constantly judging them, valuing them in partial and marginal ways. Dr. Patricia Williams coined the term spirit-murdering, and Dr. Bettina Love continues her work by examining spirit murdering in education. The process of schooling spirit murders Black boys, essentially robbing them of their being, beauty, brilliance, Blackness, and most importantly, joy. Schooling masks this deprivation through grit, curriculum, assessment and testing standards, class management, remediation, and school discipline. It is all masked as normal, and that is the problem. There is a reason why Black Boy Joy is not called Black Man Joy. It is because joy is stripped away from us in childhood, which is why adults struggle with discussing or centering the joy. Ask yourself, when is the last time someone asked you what gave you joy? *There is your answer.*

Another thing that I want to quickly address at the intersection of antiblackness and Black Boy Joy is adultification. Adultification is the phenomenon—or should I say the process of truncating the years that children get to experience childhood. Black children are denied the ability to have a quality childhood because of how society views them. Studies have shown that Black children around the ages of 7 or 8 are less likely to be viewed as children but as adults. As a result, Black children are less likely to navigate the world with childhood leniency. They are generally not given the benefit of the doubt like their white peers. When I think about adultification and childhood leniency, I always think of Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old Black boy murdered by Cleveland police within three seconds while playing by himself with a toy gun in a park. The police didn't stop to give him a warning or ask him any questions because they believed Rice to be a grown man—and grown men come with adult-like culpability. Imagine being a Black boy in this current moment. You hear what happened to Tamir Rice and Trayvon, and you think the same can happen to you for simply being a Black kid. Imagine the terror that Black parents hold with them by allowing their children to play and use their imaginations outside. You know, in this country—and I have seen many times on video, that if you are a white man with a knife or a gun, that you can still make it out of a police interaction alive. As a Black boy or young man, the likelihood of you making it out of a police interaction alive is always a precarious affair. The question that needs to be continuously asked is *why!*

NWJTE:

It's interesting to think about childhood and the different experiences that Black kids have versus white children or other BIPOC children. I noticed you teach a class on adolescents in schools and society. I imagine that in your class, you have predominantly white teacher candidates and a mainly white faculty at your university. We send our teacher candidates out into all kinds of schools, including schools with Black students, and our candidates are not necessarily prepared for those classrooms because they are prepared by people who look like me. So, in thinking of childhood and the classroom, how do you see yourself as a teacher educator helping your candidates bring into practice Black boy joy or issues such as the over-sexualization of young Black girls. How do you bridge that into your work with teacher candidates?

AG:

One of the biggest things for my teacher candidates, who are white women—is to de-center themselves. Meaning that *it ain't all about you boo boo!* The deep and necessary work that teacher candidates must understand is that teacher education is not about their experiences, politics, or beliefs. It cannot be centered on them because it must be centered on their students—you know, the whole reason why people become teachers. Being a teacher has little to do with whom you think you are; it is about the students in front of you now. What are you going to do to ensure that they are safe? That they can learn? And that they become good citizens of the world? Just because you say that you “care about all kids” does not mean that you are about actually understand the livelihoods of Black children. That rhetoric is *tired*. In Washington State, our state standards make explicit about needing to care and center the educative experiences of students from all identities, including students of color. Teacher candidates must understand that the experiences of a Black boy and girls and other children of color will be vastly different between themselves and white children. Understanding, valuing, and centering the plurality of Blackness is critical. Having an intersectional lens within education is crucial to be an equitable practitioner because, without it, you would be missing the myriad of ways that oppression intersects and interlocks for Black children in schools. Look no further than the convergence of the over-sexualization of Black girls, the school dress code policies, and the disciplinary actions they face because of it.

For me, the deep and necessary work of teacher candidates de-centering themselves starts truly with them de-centering whiteness, which is the hardest part for many. Society's investments in whiteness and white supremacy are deep! I encounter many white teacher candidates who want to be great allies—but first, I need them to understand the history of whiteness and that they are racialized as white. Beyond knowing that they are white, I need white teacher candidates to cut

their investments in whiteness. For it is through these investments that keep Black children—as the late Derrick Bell would say—at the bottom of the well. George Yancy would call this process—this cutting from whiteness, un-suturing. Teacher education needs to un-suture itself from whiteness. By un-suturing, white teacher candidates can move past the narrow views of niceness and the hollow notions of care and center racial justice in education. Combating white supremacy and antiblackness in K-12 schooling is deeper than utilizing the *tired* and *washed* rhetoric of niceness and care. White teacher candidates can begin the process of un-suturing by asking the questions of:

1. How are you planning to whiteness within your classroom and provide an equitable learning experience for Black children?
2. How are you supporting Black communities and their struggles for fundamental rights and improved material conditions?

In my experience working with white teacher candidates, the most challenging thing is that many have not had or been exposed to deep conversations about racial injustice—from either their parents, local communities, K-12 schooling experience, or in their college content-area classes. We do a tremendous disservice to students of color and white students by failing to have these deep and necessary conversations about race and racism and antiblackness within K-16 spaces. Without these conversations, so much violence gets masked as normal for Black children. So, it truly comes down to me as “the Black teacher educator”—and for many—the first Black educator in their lives to unpack these crucial elements with them. At times, it can be very challenging and tiring. Racial battle fatigue is real. It can be exhausting, especially when you encounter white resistance—such as silence, defensiveness, anecdotal evidence, and bad-faith notions. Sometimes, it feels like I must “convince” white teacher candidates to be equitable practitioners, for they forget that they are the gatekeepers to Black joy in education. It also can be challenging because I do not have much time with them. My 15-week semester with them is cut 5-weeks short because they are doing their practicum experience. So that means that I have 10 weeks to ensure that these white teacher candidates are “racially conscious.” That is a near impossibility because 10 weeks is not much time to unpack people's learning environments, their biases, and where they stand on educational justice. Sometimes, I encounter teacher candidates that believe that they can separate their private persona from their public and professional lives. And you really cannot do that, right? The private will always bleed into the public because the private persona is *who you are*. In a sense, there is no moral distance between the two—or at least there should not be. If you espouse racist ideas about Black people and communities of color, it will show up in your praxis and obscure how you see your students. And

kids can smell bullshit from a mile away. Students know when a teacher cares about who they are—and again, I am not talking about the narrow white view of care, but that *bone-deep* level.

NWJTE:

In thinking about “undoing...” what kinds of things can you change and undo in education? Right now, in Portland, specifically, the school district just ended its contract with the Portland Police Bureau for school resource officers. I’m not sure what it is like in Pullman as far as school resource officers, but many high schools around here have designated parking for police cars in front of the school. It is not unusual to walk into school buildings and see police. I recently talked with a high school teacher outside of Portland and asked what she thought about getting rid of the school resource officers. And she said, “You know, it really doesn’t matter what I think about it. I just know that the Black students in our building feel unsafe when there are police in the building. So regardless of how I feel about it, the police shouldn’t be there for that reason alone.” So, if you think about policies like that concerning antiblackness, what are some of the intersections that need to be undone within our structures?

AG:

Even starting with the conversation about police or school resource officers, we must understand that usually, the mantra is *cops keep people safe*. However, we also know that police are looking for criminals. For police to be in schools, you imply that the kids there to learn are criminals, right? Thus, why would we need to have such a heavy police presence for our kids? It creates the insinuation that because there are police here, there must be nefarious activities, that there must be children doing criminal actions. It sets a flawed narrative. However, we also know that having police in school does not mean that schools are safe, right? For me, as a grown Black man ... I don’t even have to do anything. I could just be minding my own business, and just the presence of police changes everything—the aura in the environment—the stress level in my body—because I know the history of policing and the policing of Blackness. It is such a deep visceral and bodily experience.

Moreover, I think about school policies, like how we discipline—our disciplinary policies—the zero-tolerance mantra. The fact that you could be a four-year-old Black child that writes something on the desk and gets put in handcuffs should bother everyone, but it doesn’t. It gets masked as normal. *It is what it is*. Or, if you’re a Black girl and wear the wrong pair of shoes or style your hair the alleged wrong way, you get sent home. Again, these actions should bother everyone, but they don’t. They get masked as normal. *It is what it is, right?* The ways that we, as educators, reprimand and discipline children, especially Black

children, is reprehensible. As adults, we wouldn't appreciate those policies and procedures, yet we do it to kids. Some educators want to have this immense power and control over youth, which is deeply problematic. Schooling must change. The curriculum must change. How teachers teach about specific topics must change. Recently in Spokane, WA, there was an incident where two Black girls were in class, and they were forced to pick cotton as an activity ([Students Subjected to Picking Cotton in Class](#)). There is no good pedagogical rationale for having students, especially two Black girls to be pick cotton. What type of effects does that have on students? How does that activity augment how those Black girls see themselves, their teacher, classmates, or even their view of education? There is a lot of damage done with that activity, and it's detrimental to the Black students, white students, and other students of color. The fact that a teacher thought that this was sound practice and was beneficial is the problem. Again, the violence against Black children is masked as normal, which is the problem. It is not okay, and educators must do better for Black children or do not return to the profession.

Returning to Critical Race Theory's happenings, parents, school boards, and parents, we need better supports to protect Black teachers and teachers that accurately teach racial history. You have all these collective groups that are pushing back against the truth about the United States and attacking teachers for doing their jobs. Black teachers and principals are being fired; others are being forced out with repeated threats of violence. Again, it is the violence that is masked as normal, which is the problem. We must consider the policies, practices, and procedures to protect those teachers from just doing their jobs. How are school districts going to protect Black teachers from angry parents attacking and antagonizing them? We already lack the representation necessary within the field, and this current moment of white backlash and anger will only exacerbate the issue. If our field is genuinely about educational justice, we need to consider how Black teachers will be protected.

NWJTE:

When you think about the antiblackness issue, what gives you hope and excitement with its timing, what's included in it, your work, and whom it has the potential to reach?

AG:

I'm excited about this issue. Furthermore, I think the timing is really interesting. If I had known then that the Critical Race Theory backlash would happen now, I would have fine-tuned the call for proposals about antiblackness, bad-faith, and Critical Race Theory. Maybe that will be the next call. What is exciting about this issue is that we have ten manuscripts—from scholars in the

United States and Canada engaging in a Black study about antiblackness and education. For me, that is powerful. These scholars are writing from a place of courage, strength, and loving Blackness. Moreover, they invite educational researchers and practitioners to engage in a Black study and sit with and think through these educational issues. This is crucial because even when we talk about antiblackness, some people still don't know what it is, what it looks like in schools and teacher education programs, and how antiblackness affects students, faculty, and staff. So, I see this special issue as an invitation for educators to sit down and consider how they might have perpetuated antiblackness. While the field of education is focused on being an anti-racist scholar—which is excellent—educators must consider how they contributed to antiblackness and why they uphold it. To combat antiblackness, *you must see it first*. And if you see it, you must have those conversations about what antiblackness does to our students.

We have some great pieces that will generate discussion. Black professors inside and outside education will appreciate the issue, but I also think that K-12 teachers will also enjoy the issue. Moreover, I believe that for teacher candidates and future teachers of color—especially Black teachers—this issue can be helpful to identify what they might be walking into as a teacher of color and ensure they know how to combat antiblackness. I think department chairs will find this issue of great importance because they must contend with how antiblackness exists with teacher education and field service. I also hope that department chairs will consider and reconsider the structure, the curriculum, the sequencing, and the field supervision with their programs. How can teacher education programs effectively recruit and sustain future Black teachers? How can the curriculum be tailored for Black teachers entering white educational spaces? When I talk to my department chair at WSU the question that I ask and frequently try to solve is: ‘if I was a Black student and I wanted to be an educator, why would I choose WSU?’ Moreover, ‘why be a teacher at all? What are the tools that WSU is going to provide for me? Or how is WSU going to provide a safe and inclusive space that centers my Blackness? What is my practicum experience going to be like?’ We must realize that Black college students know that being a Black teacher in a white occupation is not always enjoyable. There's a reason why we don't have Black teachers in certain schools, and teacher education programs must contend with those reasons. Many are turned off at the prospect of being a teacher because of their K-12 experience. Why be willing to pursue a profession that might have harmed you earlier in life? Why pursue a career that will not support you nor the students that look like you? I have met so many great students to do not even realize the power they hold—that they possess the qualities and characteristics of being a great teacher in a child's life, because antiblackness blocks the blessing.

NWJTE:

I agree, Amir. There are so many audiences who will benefit from reading these manuscripts. I'm thrilled that it's going to be in the NWJTE. We're excited about it!

AG:

Likewise! LaToya, and Davida, and I look forward to sharing these ideas with the world! We are thankful for this opportunity to engage in a Black study and to invite others in!

Notes About The Contributors

Maika J. Yeigh, EdD, is an associate professor in the Curriculum and Instruction Department who teaches secondary education, mainly serving students in the Graduate Teacher Education Program (GTEP). Her research interests include supporting teachers during their induction years and how a stance of teacher inquiry is displayed in the initial years of teaching, as well as how strong clinical partnerships support developing educators. In addition, she is a licensed K-12 reading specialist, with an interest in humane literacy practices that provide adolescent learners with choice and voice in their learning. She has taught in the Portland metro area for over 20 years.

Amir Gilmore, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education at Washington State University. His interdisciplinary background in Cultural Studies, Africana Studies, and Education allows him to traverse the boundaries across the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities. Amir's broad research interests are Black Aesthetics, Black Masculinities, Afrofuturism, Afro-Pessimism, and the political economy of schooling. Amir's research illuminates the understudied phenomenon known as *Black Boy Joy*. Black Boy Joy is a social and spiritual practice of Black fulfillment and Black being, and the refusal of white supremacist systems. He's sometimes on twitter @amir_asim.