The Teaching of “Dangerous” School Bodies: Toward Critical Embodied Pedagogies in English Education

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A slow composition of myself as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world... Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, visual character," but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. (Fanon 111)

Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks sketched a "historico-racial schema" under the "corporeal schema" to see beyond the "dialectic" between the Black body and the world. He asserted the embodied "tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, visual character" in a society dominated by White simplistic perspectives that view Black bodies as sites of violence. After more than half a century, Fanon's assertion still serves as a helpful reminder for all people to understand the Black body against dominant societal discourses and to situate the body as part of individuals' lives, vividly and critically.

Less than two weeks ago at the time of this writing, in early July 2016, two Black men (one in Louisiana and the other in Minnesota) were shot and killed by police officers. Not only did the fatal shootings render the death of the victims, but they both were also victimized by a history of racism in the United States, a country that boasts equity, democracy, and the American Dream in the international arena. Saddened and shocked by the tragedies, I cannot help but ask the following questions: Why does the dominant White discourse toward the Black body continue to perpetuate? As English educators, where shall we continue to locate pedagogical spaces in relation to racism and justice? How shall we implement critical literacies in recognizing the body?

History ironically repeats itself. The dominant White discourse, from the US civil rights movement in the 1960s through the 1991 Rodney King case, continues to illustrate the violent presences of Black bodies. Responding to the 1991 Rodney King case in which Rodney, a Black taxi driver, was beaten harshly by several police officers in Los Angeles, Judith Butler revisited Fanon's work and iterated that "the black body is circumscribed as dangerous, prior to any gesture, any raising of the hand" (18). Such discourse continues to position Black bodies as dangerous, further permeating into the school-to-prison-pipeline public schooling system for the country's most at-risk children.

On the other hand, there has been a neglect of students' bodily selves at school, and their embodied text creations are silenced and sanctioned given the disciplinary power of school that maintains school as an institution of surveillance (Foucault). Students of color, especially represented by Black students, begin to face school sanction as early as when they enter the public schooling system. At such an early age, they are supposed to have more freedom in physical expressions through play. However, a recent report from the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights discloses that...
Black students represent 48 percent of the preschoolers who receive more than one out-of-school suspension, representing the highest suspension rate among all children of color; boys, who account for 54 percent of preschool enrollment, represent approximately 80 percent of preschool children suspended once or multiple times (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights).

More severely, the report concludes that such racial disparities are prevalent throughout the prekindergarten–12 system and that students of color face stark levels of discipline, including but not limited to in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, school expulsion, referral to law enforcement, and school-related arrest. It is crucial to notice that none of the terms of school discipline mentioned in the report is clearly defined to guide school-based disciplinary decisions. For example, “referral to law enforcement” can be “reported to any law enforcement agency or official, including a school police unit, for an incident,” indicating that students could receive a negative record of “referral to law enforcement” if a teacher reports an undefined “incident” to school police (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 22). Meanwhile, “school-related arrest is an arrest of a student for any activity conducted on school grounds . . . or due to a referral by any school official” (22). Overall, such a vague, unlawful school discipline system has been used to regulate and punish students’ school behaviors. Such a system in reality endangers the educational opportunities for students of color that their disciplinary labels can become a first step toward the juvenile justice system; school disciplines that confine and negatively assume students’ bodily expressions worsen the situation for those students who are trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline.

In this article, I first reflect on my transnational journey in English education. I then build upon Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt’s critique of the dimension of body within “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” (New London Group) to bring attention to students being “physically but not linguistically gifted” (Genishi and Dyson 10) in teaching English language arts (ELA). I further discuss the possibility of implementing critical embodied pedagogies to complement the postmodern pedagogical spaces for English education. To begin, I start with my own experience as a student, teacher, and teacher educator in English education from China to the United States.

**A Transnational Reflective Journey in English Education**

In the past ten years, I went through a professional teaching and learning trajectory transitioning from teaching English as a second language in K–8 urban classrooms in China to being a graduate student and then an instructor in literacy education at two universities in New York City.

My teaching in China was based on a mandated British English curriculum. My colleagues and I were required to teach English through stories centering on the lives of “Jim and Lucy.” The stories highlighted the “beautiful” blonde figures who were the main characters of each unit in the mandated textbooks. We taught these English stories to Chinese children, including the children of migrant workers who were attending local classrooms in Shanghai. Most of my students came from the same Chinese ethnic group (Han) and they spoke Mandarin, Shanghainese, and/or another dialect at home; most of them never saw a White child in their lives.

Students were further arranged to sit in rows, each with a desk, a common public school seating arrangement in China from kindergarten to the twelfth grade. Their behaviors were strictly regulated by school rules. For example, students had to sit up straight with both arms on the desk during any class period. Methods of teaching were limited as both curriculum and students’ bodies were confined. Alternatively, my colleagues and I had to create and navigate other instructional spaces. We brought real-life objects into the classroom to spark conversations. We also encouraged students to use body gestures when they were asked to share individually. We used these “rebellious” trials to lighten the restrictions on students from the monitored curriculum and classroom environment.

I came to the United States first as an international graduate student studying curriculum and teaching. Benefiting from a postmodern lens, my perception of English teaching has shifted, from enacting relatively structured second language instruction toward embracing broadened, integrated, and remixed multimodal methods of reading and
writing that are responsive to students’ changing world of popular (digital) culture.

I have gained interest in studying children’s text creations and understanding the complex symbolic resources that they bring into the classroom (Dyson). During my master’s and doctoral studies, I followed students of color in classrooms in Harlem and Chinatown where Black, Latin@, and Asian students reside. I began to reflect on how ELA curricula could reflect underrepresented students of color and how teaching could be culturally and critically responsive to students’ changing culture (Ladson-Billings). My ongoing learning experiences with and from my mentors, colleagues, and students in the United States constantly cultivate my new identity as a teacher educator and further help me consider pedagogies for teacher candidates to move beyond the limits of standardized testing. I believe that students’ use of “textual toys” (Dyson 10) and playful learning should not be limited to teaching ELA in early childhood and primary classrooms but should be supported at all grade levels. I also believe that a liberated text-rich English classroom should value students’ multilingual backgrounds (Genish and Dyson) and include written, oral, aural, visual, digital, and bodily expressions with flexible pedagogical spaces that welcome spontaneous performances and improvisations (Boldt, Lewis, and Leander; Leander and Boldt).

Revisiting Multiliteracies: Body as Central Mode of Meanings

In this section, I embark on Leander and Boldt’s critique of the popularly cited “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” (New London Group) in the field of literacy education to reflect on how a multiliteracies framework in an urban classroom environment cannot adequately address the needs of students’ bodily expressions. The term multiliteracies was coined to highlight the relationships between texts and design. It was developed under the umbrella of New Literacy Studies (NLS) in which literacy scholars expanded the definition of literacy from a standardized deficit model of teaching with correct ways of acquiring English reading and writing toward sociocultural literacy practices (e.g., Gee; Heath; Street). Shirley B. Heath and Brian V. Street in the 1980s documented community-based literacy practice through ethnographic studies. They powerfully illustrated that reading and writing can never be a set of decontextualized skills to be obtained and used in universal ways with predetermined outcomes, or measured by fixed criteria for all. NLS broadened the scope of literacy and further critiqued how White dominant criteria of literacy were imposed onto other cultures in school settings (Street); it features a postmodern lens to value the socioculturally situated nature of literacy that is rooted in various worldviews.

Based on the sociocultural perspective offered by NLS, in 1994, a group of international researchers gathered in New London, New Hampshire, to discuss the future of literacy pedagogy through “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” (New London Group). Multiliteracies attends to the cultural and linguistic diversity that leads to the plurality of texts; it emphasizes the salient global digital context with increasing information and multimedia technologies (New London Group). They identified six interconnected modes of design to inform pedagogy, including linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal design of meanings. The term design was used by the New London Group to replace the word grammar to signify the postmodern variety and fluidity of texts. Among the six modes of design, gestural mode refers to body language and sensuality (New London Group). The six design modes were further expanded and the “gestural mode” was revised by two members from the New London Group as “[r]epresentation to oneself may take the form of feelings and emotions or rehearsing action sequences in one’s mind’s eye” (Cope and Kalantzis 13).

In the framework of multiliteracies, body is understood as a sign system that helps extend the sign-making activities by reading, writing, and other modes of meanings (Leander and Boldt). The six design modes were further expanded and the “gestural mode” was revised by two members from the New London Group as “[r]epresentation to oneself may take the form of feelings and emotions or rehearsing action sequences in one’s mind’s eye” (Cope and Kalantzis 13).

It is the body that lets human beings feel the world as firsthand experiences; it is the body that leads people to see and explore aesthetics in daily life.
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in the classroom may not always involve their intentional efforts toward sign making; the embodied text creation process is about “the sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity” (25). Their critique is useful in considering why and how to implement embodied texts in ELA teaching. First, the current framework of multiliteracies sets “multimodal design” as its central mode of meanings (New London Group), which is too broad to highlight the unique bodily dimension of literacies. On the other hand, the framework emphasizes the design product of various modes of meanings but neglects the emergent processes of developing texts in the making by students (Leander and Boldt). Such overemphasis could limit students’ artistic text improvisations in the classroom. Finally, the framework fails to critically address language and culture. Although developed with a “critical framing” to “gain the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned, constructively critique it, account for its cultural location” (New London Group 86–87), the framing describes “critical” as the learning of different cultures to extend one’s previous learning, which “represents one sort of transfer of learning” (87). However, “linking these [six modes of] Design differences to different cultural purposes” (88) with a plurality of cultural signs woven together does not by default lead to inclusivity for students of color. Critical multiculturalism (e.g., May and Sleeter; Nieto) should be added to the framing to address the underrepresented practices of students of color including their sanctioned bodies at school.

Despite the fact that the multiliteracies framework has informed a large number of studies that focus on the sociocultural and multimodal aspects of school-based literacy events, students’ literacy embodiment has not yet been viewed as a focus of theory and practice in the ELA classrooms (Leander and Boldt). Although scholars have begun to study students’ school-based embodied texts in relation to race, identity, performance, popular culture, and/or digital literacy experiences (e.g., Ehret and Hollett; Enriquez; Hughes; Johnson and Vasudevan; Kontovourki; Shapiro), limited research has critically looked at the sanctioned bodies of students of color and how students’ embodiment helps offer the possibilities of mobilizing the current disciplined school curricula.

Toward Critical Embodied Pedagogies in English Education

Fanon argued that in the dominant White world there was a fixed image of the Black man, with English language used to reinforce the Black body image: “To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible” (Fanon 35). To break the harmfully stereotyped body image perceived and determined by dominant societal discourses, nuanced classroom stories particularly focusing on the bodies of students of color need to be documented and shared. Such stories contribute to the formation of critical embodied pedagogies and further help complement the pedagogical spaces of New English Education (Kirkland). Such stories move beyond addressing the plurality of expressions in ELA teaching, enact curriculum to sustain students’ cultural practices, and make teaching remixed, vivid, and truly differentiated toward students’ symbolic selves. Such stories further help enact critical embodied literacies in the English classroom, making artistic spaces for embodiment while affirming, valuing, liberating, and advocating students’ embodied literacies.

Maxine Greene called for expanded literacy experiences for students, by encouraging teachers to “expand the range of literacy: offering the young new ways of symbolizing, new ways of structuring their experience” (50). Her call is an aesthetic reminder for teachers to think of learning as exploratory, sensory, full of (e)motions (versus regulated). In ELA teaching, there is an urgent need to address students’ improvisational, imaginative, and artistic text creations and create pedagogical spaces to highlight the body as an assemblage of texts that are “forever changing and emerging anew” (Leander and Boldt 29).

Students’ bodily expressions are by nature their playful and (e)motional movements, spontaneously or not, and connect to the various texts they encounter in and outside of school. Sadly, driven
by school discipline and standardized testing, the physically gifted students of color are often suffocated, monitored, and punished in both curriculum and the physical classroom environment. Their theatrical improvisation, playfulness in learning, and other nontraditional artistic expressions are often simplistically grouped into "behavioral problems" throughout their schooling experiences. To critically mobilize students' literacy experiences, I provide some ideas as a first step to support classroom-based critical embodied pedagogies (see Table 1).

I see these ideas as a starting point to critically examine and reflect on current ELA teaching practices. I further see the importance of enacting embodied pedagogies not as "add-on" teaching activities but as the "new norms" of accepting and advocating students' bodily expressions in their everyday school lives. I acknowledge that this pedagogical call for remixing literacy embodied in teaching may be taken up differently by ELA teachers considering the reality of school discipline, time, space, and class size. My goal is to invite teachers from all grade levels to develop the consciousness of teaching via the body, to remove the disciplinary "cuffs" on Black bodies, and to value the bodily improvisations of all students, before eventually reaching a critical and fluid curriculum with (e)motions.

**TABLE 1. Ideas for supporting critical embodied pedagogies in ELA teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tentative Categories</th>
<th>Pedagogical Spaces for the Body</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constructing new norms of embodied communicative practices</td>
<td>Applying &quot;body language&quot; in everyday teaching and learning (e.g., co-constructing an emergent chart of classroom body language with students; encouraging students to improvise responses through their bodies in addition to oral and written texts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence in embodied communication</td>
<td>Practicing bodily expressions in official and unofficial classroom spaces; emphasizing both storytelling and storyacting; (re)designing body movements for meaning making (e.g., creating theatrical acts to reflect on key details of a chapter; continuing to present body gestures by revising/changing the previously performed embodied texts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring and presenting embodied narrative expressions</td>
<td>Watching theater plays, creative dances, and movie scenes, engaging with interactive bodily conversations (including facial expressions) to show moment-by-moment (e)motions and/or designed textual meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring and presenting embodied remixed arts expressions</td>
<td>Taking photos/videos of body movements; listening to music from a variety of sources (e.g., classroom singing, iTunes, websites and software); learning, revising, remaking, and performing songs (with mobile devices or via digital apps); designing remixed (digital) dramatic performances, including visual, theatrical, and/or musical scenes, etc.</td>
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**Works Cited**


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Candidates Announced for Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Secondary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

**For Members of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee** (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2018): Susan Barber, Northgate High School, Georgia; Jalissa Bates, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana; David F. Cain, Hesperia Unified School District, California; Hattie Maguire, Novi High School, Michigan; Mark Sulzer, University of Cincinnati, Ohio; Sarah M. Zerwin, Fairview High School, Boulder, Colorado.

Members of the 2016–17 Secondary Section Nominating Committee are Jill Davidson, Anglophone School District West, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, chair; James Chisholm, University of Louisville, Kentucky; and Janet Neyer, Cadillac High School, Michigan.

Lists of candidates for all of the ballots can be found on the NCTE website at http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections.