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HOW TO AVOID BECOMING THE ACCOMPLICE TO YOUR OWN MURDERERS:  
READING JAMES BALDWIN AS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGUE

by

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Major: English

The University of Memphis

December 2018

## Abstract

James Baldwin is a well-known author and activist in American literature. He had long been a champion of civil rights, using his platform to speak about the iniquities and issues affecting black people in America. Though his work is read often in literary circles, his writing could serve to supplement the field of critical pedagogy with Rhetoric and Composition. Paulo Freire, the conceiver of critical pedagogy through his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, identified the pitfalls of educational systems that see teachers as knowledge-givers and students as knowledge receptacles based on his experiences teaching illiterate adults in Brazil under an oppressive government. Critical pedagogy can be better adapted to the societal and educational issues plaguing America by reading Baldwin as a critical pedagogue. Doing so would supplement how writing educators perceive African American Vernacular English, encourage students to think critically about society, and remind all educators that this critical work can be done within writing classrooms.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Freire, Critical Pedagogy, and its Limitations	6
A Talk to Teachers	15
Considerations of Black English	22
The Role of the Writer	35
Conclusion	45
Works Cited	48

## INTRODUCTION

James Baldwin was a well-known author and activist whose written work has remained timeless when considering the tumultuous racist past (and present) of America. In both his fiction and nonfiction writing, Baldwin expressed his love for this country despite knowing that—as a black gay man—this country didn't love him. His criticism of American institutions stems from that same love of country, helping to voice the frustrations of so many Americans.

Baldwin's body of work is in a resurgence. Interview footage in which he is featured can easily be found on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with commentary from viewers, old and young alike. His words have been plastered on walls and protest signs in addition to the first frame of Jay-Z's "Family Feud" music video. Although the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Baldwin's passing is slowly approaching, his words have just as much power, if not more, than they had when he was alive. Teenagers and young adults seem to relate to Baldwin's matter-of-fact observations and criticisms of the world we live in, an ironic remark since many would think that America has changed a great deal since the 1960s and 1970s; and yet, nothing has really changed. Police brutality remains a problem as black victims are killed without provocation, and black children have also become victims to this phenomenon, being seen as adults and losing their innocence—and sometimes lives—in the process. Education, once deemed the "Great Equalizer," hardly seems equal as many children in America do not receive the same education as their peers. This difference in experiences for American children can be connected to the pervasiveness of racial and socioeconomic inequality in this country. A fair share of American citizens refuses to acknowledge the effect that white supremacy has had on this country and its public institutions, and they counter with the false narrative of the American Dream, saying it can only be obtained by pulling up one's own bootstraps and, thereby, denying that some may

not even have the boots. Throughout his writing, Baldwin has considered what it means to be American and to deal with this ideology unique to this country that uplifts some and stigmatizes others.

Baldwin's fiction, including novels, short stories, and plays, are taught often by educators as his work serves as a good starting point for discussions of race, class, sexuality, and religion for students of varying levels. His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is semi-autobiographical, giving readers insight into Baldwin's tumultuous relationship with his father and, thereby, the Black Church. His groundbreaking novel *Giovanni's Room* features a gay protagonist having to deal with his same-sex relationship that developed while abroad and the heterosexual relationship he maintains in America. Even Baldwin's nonfiction essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" is considered a work of general literary theory as he examined the pitfalls of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in relation to her portrayal of black characters despite her abolitionist intentions.

Although Baldwin's work is heavily discussed within literary and activist circles, he has much to offer the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Throughout several of his nonfiction works, Baldwin has expressed how writing and education can positively affect American society by empowering black people with the knowledge and skills to express themselves in writing while considering the systemic issues affecting them in America. This common theme present in his body of work—with a focus on America's relationship to and history with black people—makes a thought-provoking comparison with the concept of critical pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition. Paulo Freire's foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* helped compositionists to consider how the current-traditional method of teaching writing may have

unintended (and possibly intended) social and political consequences.<sup>1</sup> Freire also described how teaching can invoke liberation—freedom from the systemic oppression that encourages conformity to unethical societal values—for both teachers and students when instructors evaluate and adapt their pedagogy for their students.

Freire, along with scholars influenced by his work, expressed that teaching can be a form of activism when teachers share the responsibility of learning with their students. Through an emphasis in dialogue, teachers learn from what their students observe and communicate without forcibly steering their students' perceptions of the world to look like their own. When teachers encourage their students to re-examine their world, they are empowering them to name that world with the language that they use and that is reflective of their experiences. This theoretical understanding of the power of education reinforces how important it is for educators to recognize the implications of their role *as educators*, including the content of their lessons. Not engaging with that power can cause educators to misuse their role by indoctrinating students rather than guiding them through various teachable moments.

The field of Rhetoric and Composition is best suited to do the work that critical pedagogy asks because of the various topics that are covered within writing classrooms. With influence from current scholarship, the teaching of writing has moved away from skill drills and into deeper understandings of what it means to be a writer, what it means to write, how to persuade, and how to identify the elements of persuasion in multimodal contexts. Simply, the teaching of writing is now much more concerned with the writer and how the writer writes and perceives their world. This is the setting that would best suit the use of critical pedagogy informed by

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<sup>1</sup> Current-traditionalism, in relationship to the teaching of writing, is a pedagogy focused more on product rather than process. Inadvertently, this method encourages formulaic writing fitting the teacher's perceptions of "good" writing rather than writing that could more fully engage with a topic beyond the parameters of an assignment.

Baldwin's assertions on race in America. Because Baldwin discusses education in more than the college setting, I cannot limit what he says about race and the writer to the writing classroom, but his discussions of the role of the writer can certainly be applied to writers of all ages. It is necessary to remember that Baldwin often discusses the issues affecting black children, and that population is highlighted often herein.

Baldwin firmly observed how the miseducation of black children can serve to disenfranchise and disempower them for generations to come, but this future can be avoided when educators, especially writing instructors, remind their students that they have the power to change their surrounding circumstances and, by extension, the existing conditions of the world. In fact, empowering their students in this manner also serves to empower the teacher: "A teacher who is not free to teach is not a teacher....And to teach in the situation in which black people find themselves, really to teach, is a revolutionary act" (Baldwin & Giovanni 89). Educators have the opportunity—and I'd argue, the responsibility—to encourage their students to examine their critical perceptions of their experiences.

Much of what Baldwin says that is directed to or about educators can certainly be applicable to writing instructors who find themselves questioning their pedagogy in a political climate that breeds "alternative truths" and #AllLivesMatter, especially when Baldwin directly addresses the role of the writer in his nonfiction work. Though some might argue that his use of "writer" is a signifier for a professional writer, I would counter that anyone who writes is a writer, much like anyone who employs rhetoric is a rhetor. Anyone engaging in that simple action can describe themselves as a doer of that action. And with naming ourselves and our students as writers—without any concern for labels reflective of experience—Baldwin's

concerns and observations for writers, poets, and artists are applicable to all students of writing (as various forms of writing can be considered art).

I argue that much of Baldwin's nonfiction writing concerning writing, language, education, race, and the cross-sections thereof can inform critical pedagogy scholarship as he wrestled with many of the concepts, theories, and real-world issues that Freire and other critical pedagogues have considered in their scholarship. Criticism of Freire's critical pedagogy includes how the scholar's work is specific to Brazil and to his teaching of illiterate adults, despite pressure from the government to cease such actions. By reading Baldwin within Freire's pedagogical framework, we can better consider the racial and economic issues affecting black (and other minority) students in America while also determining more effective applications of critical pedagogy in writing classrooms. However, Baldwin's perspective in this area comes not from an experience in education but from experiences as a black gay man, a writer, and an American; not to say that these critical pedagogues' work haven't been informed by personal experience but Baldwin's perspective within this field of study offers a more diverse range of experiences related specifically to living as a black person in America, an experience of which many students within the writing classroom have first-hand knowledge, which is not the case with the majority of writing instructors or Rhetoric and Composition scholars who teach in America's colleges and universities.

To highlight these concepts within Baldwin's work, I will first offer background of key concepts in critical pedagogy from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* then thoughtfully consider whether critical pedagogy, as it stands today, would aid writing instructors in subverting the tumultuous surroundings of the classroom and in mining their students' personal experiences for the purpose of critically examining how their lives are affected by systemic racism. For this

paper, I will focus solely on black students of varying ages as the audience that writing instructors must learn to effectively reach and address. With a selection from Baldwin's nonfiction, I will provide examples of his considerations related to education, teaching, writing/writers, canonical literature, and English as a language in association with texts from critical pedagogues to better show how Baldwin should be read alongside critical pedagogues who have impacted the teaching and the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

#### FREIRE, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Paulo Freire has influenced a generation of educators, activists, and scholars on how education, literacy, and language are inherently political and are manipulated to the behest of marginalized populations. His well-known book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, introduced American educators to his theories concerning education and knowledge acquisition, and to his observations in weaponizing literacy as a tool for marginalized students. This text is considered to be a foundational text for the field of critical pedagogy, having inspired scholars like bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor. In publications like *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* and *Critical Teaching for Everyday Life*, Shor engages directly with the application of Freire's theory in American education, using Freire's work to create a counter to the effects of the Reagan administration in public education with particular emphasis in the field of Rhetoric and Composition.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I will highlight Freire's theory concerning teaching and its role in political resistance in order to demonstrate how his considerations of education and oppression are supplemented and supported by Baldwin's writings on the same topics.

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<sup>2</sup> *A Pedagogy for Liberation* is essentially a series of transcripts of dialogue between Shor and Freire as they discuss multiple topics related to education and society.

Freire identifies the most popular model of education to be the “banking” concept of education; in this concept, students act as “containers” or “receptacles” for knowledge that is doled out by their teacher (72). Good students are those who are deemed to be more than willing and quite receptive to being “filled” with knowledge (Freire 72). This concept prohibits free thinking, and conversely, this system rewards students who suppress any free thought or critical consciousness in favor of adopting the gifted knowledge of the teacher without question. Freire notes, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (73). In preventing and prohibiting that intervention in transforming the world, oppressors stand to benefit from the continued control of free-thinking individuals who function as the oppressed within society. Oppressors and the oppressed occupy the same world, but the oppressors have created educational and socioeconomic systems that prevent malaise and change in the power structure. On this note, Freire argues, “[T]he interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppressed them;’ for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (74). *Conscientização*—the term coined by Freire meaning “critical consciousness”—is a threat to maintaining the power structure that benefits the oppressors, so the banking concept of education serves to avert that threat by discouraging the oppressed to become critical of the world that surrounds them (Freire 74).

A solution that Freire offers to this educational model of indoctrination is to collapse the barrier between the students and the teacher. In doing so, the role of the teacher and the role of the student become interchangeable in that students can teach and that teachers can learn from students (Freire 80). This solution runs contrary to the banking concept that relies on the teacher

exercising authority in the classroom when giving the gift of knowledge to students. The teacher's authority serves as credibility in fulfilling the role as an educator but also in denying students the ability to engage with their creativity under the guise of furthering their education. Critiquing the role of the teacher, Freire says, "The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (Freire 77). His use of the ivory tower idiom hints slightly at higher education and how scholarship and knowledge is typically deemed to be "created" within ivory tower isolation. This critique of education in general questions where real critical thinking about reality takes place, and following this critique, Freire offers another solution to the banking concept: problem-posing education.

In problem-posing education, Freire argues that it is necessary to create a dialogue between students and teachers concerning reality by communicating about those issues that affect them and their worlds (79). Doing so helps to change the critical consciousness of those involved, leading even more to the collapse of the dominant teacher role within the classroom. Through dialogue, "[t]he teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire 80). Communication in the form of dialogue furthers this revolutionary education that seeks to subvert the banking concept by encouraging critical consciousness in learning from one another, teacher and students.

Freire argues that when students are persistently challenged, through the use of problem-posing, to consider the troubles that affect the world, these students are made to feel that they possess the power to produce the change and effect progress in the world for which they are presented problems (81). Freire adds that in order for true dialogue to take place that those

involved must engage with critical thinking, identifying no dichotomy between themselves as dialoguers (92). Dialogue, according to Freire, stands to be a tool of liberating the oppressed, to move forward into true liberation from the hierarchical structure maintained by the oppressors. He states, “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 79). All of what Freire has noted as solutions to the banking concept serve as tools for liberating those who have become accustomed to such a system, for urging the oppressed to seize their education in order to change what affects their world.

Emphasizing the necessity for effective communication, Freire notes that educators and politicians are responsible for understanding the language of the people. Here, Freire sees “effective” communication to be where both parties can express themselves and be understood through the fluent use of the people’s language. He argues that in past attempts to create dialogue, educators and politicians are unable to reach their audiences because their language is not representative of the people to whom they address themselves; their language is not “attuned to the concrete situation of the people” they seek to communicate with (Freire 96). In order to achieve such a feat, Freire suggests that educators and politicians seek to “understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (96). This ending phrase, “dialectically framed,” refers to how different populations possess different cultural and linguistic touchstones—Freire, in his own manner, calls this a “thematic universe,” consisting of “generative themes”—that may not be easily recognized or understood by those living outside of such populations. However, generative themes would allow for those educators and politicians to become more aware of the realities and the thoughts of the audience they seek to address (96-97). Freire argues, “To apprehend these themes and to understand them is to understand both the people who embody them and the reality to which they refer” (107).

This strategy only makes sense as Freire argues that teachers cannot reach students—and politicians cannot reach their constituents—if they do not speak the language or the dialect of those people; not doing so would further inhibit communication between the parties as miscommunication would be inevitable, and a true dialogue—a tool for freedom and revolution, according to Freire—could not take place.

Freire's experience with education, that he references often in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is with impoverished illiterate adults in Brazil. During the '60s, Freire worked as part of an educational movement orchestrated across Brazil that was supported by the government to alleviate the number of illiterate adults in the country, numbering nearly 2 million people. However, in 1964, after a government coup, he was imprisoned because his teachings were considered to be "subversive" ("Paulo Freire Biography"). For Freire, his work was a form of protest in the midst of an oppressive regime who saw his teaching illiterate adults to identify and re-examine their oppression as countering the federal government's mission of maintaining the impoverished status of these illiterate individuals. He was even exiled and did not return to Brazil until the '70s. Though America was dealing with the effects of conservative economic policies that affected several public institutions, American educators were not threatened with imprisonment or death if they chose to apply Freire's theory in their classrooms. This historical context is in juxtaposition to the historical context of the '70s and '80s when critical pedagogy gained steam in America.

Freire and his work have inspired many critical pedagogues to take up the work of making education an act of liberation. Among them, Ira Shor and Henry Giroux stand out for their work in Rhetoric & Composition and Educational Theory, respectively. Shor has spoken often and published at-length about the shortcomings of higher education and the field of

Rhetoric and Composition. Referring persistently to his working-class upbringing in the Bronx, Shor has considered how composition courses—though they may have the goal of orienting students to the University—can also serve as gatekeepers to academia.<sup>3</sup> Generally in his scholarship, he has considered how Freire can be applied to American education and to composition classrooms. His concerns about learning and literacy mirror those of Freire: “General writing or thinking skills can’t be deployed to make students better writers. Literacy develops through performance in contexts that are meaningful to people” (Greenbaum & Shor 18). Shor is concerned with how students engage in learning through performing in specific contexts rather than mimicking the ways of their instructors. Yet, he has also considered some of the criticism of critical pedagogy that asserts it is “softheaded,” countering that critical pedagogy is, in fact, “not permissive. Students and teachers are not free to do what they want whenever they want. It’s a negotiated relationship in the critical study of subject matters” (Greenbaum & Shor 18). Shor does not see Freire’s theory as a free-for-all simply because problem-posing and dialogic discussion are encouraged, but instead, he has used Freire’s theory to better consider the systems present within higher education that privilege money over the supposed purpose of college instruction.

Giroux, in his Marxism-influenced perspective of schooling and his summary of Anthony Gramsci’s theory, argues that as an industrial nation, the United States disperses cultural capital, such as “that system of meanings, abilities, language forms, and tastes that are directly and indirectly defined by dominant groups as socially legitimate” (qtd. in Giroux 40). This cultural capital serves to separate the haves from the have-nots, the oppressors from the oppressed. Here, Giroux draws on Gramsci to illustrate the arbitrariness of what is deemed to be “socially

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<sup>3</sup> See “Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality” by Ira Shor.

legitimate” in this country, and he continues his discussion to emphasize how the American education system seeks to support this hierarchical system in teachers’ classrooms (54-57). Much like Freire, Giroux suggests, “What classroom teachers can and must do is work in their respective roles to develop pedagogical theories and methods that link self-reflection and understanding with a commitment to change the nature of the larger society” (58). For Giroux, the onus of this revolution in education is on the teacher as the teacher remains in a role of authority within the classroom and can change how the classroom functions; and the teacher must create an environment within the classroom that allows for students to be active in their education, emphasizing critical thinking and social action (58-59). Giroux and Freire are both arguing that education should have an impact beyond the classroom and should not serve as a means of indoctrinating the next generations into systems of oppression that deny their humanity because of what they do not possess in social goods.

In discussing how students currently engage with their own learning in higher education, Kelly Ritter critiques the American application of Freire’s “liberatory” pedagogy. First, she notes that critical pedagogy, within the writing classroom, makes the act of writing a political act; however, assigning such a value to the act of writing makes it difficult for students to disengage from the value when they write in their own spaces outside of the classroom (Ritter 22). Writing as a political act does appear to be a teacher’s method of empowering students, but Ritter makes a valid point in noting that politicizing writing in the classroom affects all writing that students produce. Second, Ritter contends with the role of the teacher and its effect on students and the classroom. Freire argues that the teacher and the students should be in positions to learn from one another through dialogue, and in doing so, both teacher and students are responsible for the learning within the classroom. Ritter points out that the teacher would have to be absent from the

classroom, physically and ideologically, to not have an authoritarian—even if only minimal—effect on students’ dialogue (25). This criticism is quite fair because despite teachers’ goals in moving away from the banking concept and embracing the student-teacher dialogic dynamic, students have long been taught to view the teacher as an authority figure with credibility; and that perception of educators does not easily leave students, even when the teacher encourages it.

It is not farfetched to argue that even when the teacher has made moves in subverting their authority for creating a better learning environment that all of that work can be undermined by how students have interacted with past and present educators. Ritter’s critique suggests that the Freirean classroom could not possibly exist. Lastly, Ritter notes that “[most Freirean models in first-year composition courses] do not, as a rule, assume a great deal of knowledge on the student’s part prior to entry” (29). She explains that this is due to the introductory nature of such courses, but this underlying assumption of students being unknowledgeable within Freire’s theory seems to wholly contradict what he offers in the student-teacher solution.

In “Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” Peter Elbow critiques the popularity and the use of Freire’s theory in America not long after its publication. He argues that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may have inspired educators to change the ways they teach or describe their teaching, but in order to enact real, feasible change in the classroom, these same educators must admit that they are not and cannot actually do what Freire has done in his work as an educator and in what he outlines in his book (Elbow 247). He describes teachers and students as “bamboozled,” with teachers bamboozling themselves and their students. Teachers bamboozle their students by leading them to see the classroom (and their teacher) as open and freeing, but ultimately, teachers retain the authority to make decisions and to determine credit earned (Elbow 248). He argues that teachers are not in a position to enact Freire’s theory, and it’s not surprising because

the context of Freire's work was far from institutional education (Elbow 253). And considering Freire's purpose in his theory of liberating students, Elbow flatly states, "There are other goals for education that to make people free" (255). In his critique, Elbow argues that the teacher cannot determine the needs of the student and that students have their own motivation in pursuing education; and that motivation must be respected. These are valid critiques of how Freire's work has been co-opted by American educators, but Freire's theory is certainly not to be followed so stringently. It offers much more as a guide rather than as explicit instructions in challenging the power structures within the classroom and having students to consider what they might do to disrupt the oppressive systems that affect their lives.

Here, Baldwin and his thoughts on educating black children, complemented with his reflections on his life experiences, serve as a means of seeing Freire's theory presented from another vessel, a vessel whose experience is much more specific to America and the racial, socioeconomic conflict therein. By reading Baldwin as a critical pedagogue, we can support Freire's theory of liberation while obtaining a more unique perspective on how America seems to function with the oppressive structures that it maintains.

#### A TALK TO TEACHERS

Despite his death, James Baldwin seems to stay in today's conscious through his revived presence in popular culture and media. We've seen several Black Lives Matter protest signs featuring quotes from Baldwin. A feature length film based on his book of the same title *I Am Not Your Negro* was released last year. The music video for Jay-Z's song "Family Feud" opens with an epigraph from Baldwin. Actress Yara Shahidi espouses her love and admiration of Baldwin constantly in speeches, interviews, and social media and has even featured Baldwin's

image as her profile picture on Twitter. I say all of this to demonstrate that Baldwin and his body of work aren't going anywhere any time soon; to that point, we should be reconsidering possible influences and applications of his work.

The field of Rhetoric and Composition could benefit from analyzing Baldwin's writing concerning the impact of America's educational system on marginalized populations, specifically African Americans. Critical pedagogues have seemingly dealt with this topic through discussions of Freire and his work from the '80s to the present, but those discussions are rarely concerned with how race affects students' education and teachers' pedagogical methods. Baldwin can inform these previous scholarly discussions with his assertions about race and education in this country.

In his speech "A Talk to Teachers," originally titled "The Negro Child: His Self Image," Baldwin tells his audience of teachers that they have the power to change the world by helping their students determine how to effect change, thereby exercising their agency in a society that purposely limits them. He also implores educators to reconsider what role education plays within the lives of black students during the "current" turbulent times.

This speech was delivered not long after the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers and the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama where four black girls died as a result. It is fair to assume that the *kairos* for Baldwin's speech originated from these and other horrific events associated with the Civil Rights Movement at the time, as he notes in his speech that teachers must find ways to discuss what is happening in their students' worlds in order to better understand how they are perceiving these events around them.

Baldwin specifically identifies the need to address the lives of black students as they are directly affected by American society in regards to race and socioeconomic status. Though he is

consistently referencing black children, his criticism remains relevant for black children and college students growing and learning in today's educational system. To ignore Baldwin's intent in identifying the needs of these black children—growing up during a time of much political and social unrest—is to ignore Baldwin's criticism of how America has yet to face its demons within its history, and that lack of reflection affects black children as they are educated in a system where they are taught how little they are worth to this country. Seeming to borrow from W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness, Baldwin asserts that any black child—and really any black man or woman—who was born and raised in this country is likely to be “schizophrenic.”

On the one hand he is born in the shadow of the stars and stripes and he is assured it represents a nation which has never lost a war. He pledges allegiance to that flag which guarantees ‘liberty and justice for all.’ ...But on the other hand he is also assured by his county and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization—that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured. He is assumed by the republic that he, his father, his mother, and his ancestors were happy, shiftless, watermelon-eating darkies who loved Mr. Charlie and Miss Ann, that the value he as a black man is proven by one thing only—his devotion to white people. (“A Talk to Teachers” 326)

He notes that black children are having to face the dichotomy of being black and being an American, learning that what they have been taught about this country in terms of equal opportunities does not apply to them and that, because they are black, cannot expect all the rights and privileges afforded to white Americans. Baldwin even says that black children observe their worlds closely and determine the forces that are at play, though they may not have the vocabulary to identify what exactly they are seeing within their families and in their

neighborhoods (“A Talk to Teachers” 327). Baldwin notes that black children often observe and discover “the shape of [their] oppression” in school, so the environment of education stands to be a setting where systems of oppression can be tackled by educators (“A Talk to Teachers” 327). A valuable part of this speech is how Baldwin concerns himself with the needs of black children specifically, even recalling his own childhood, and the application of critical pedagogy in America can benefit from this specificity of race. Yet, this speech would be fare for educators looking to get a good general message about teaching children in general to see the truth in their worlds. However, by generalizing this speech as a means of discussing how to teach all students, teachers and scholars would be furthering the racism apparent in the educational system by ignoring how systemic racism and oppression is rampant throughout American institutions and how black students remain victims of such state-sponsored violence.

Baldwin offers advice to teachers, in this speech, that correlates well to theoretical concepts from critical pedagogy, despite critical pedagogy’s popularity peaking ten years after this speech was delivered and published. He emphasizes that the institution of education plays a role in society as an agent of socialization. Students not only learn “objective” knowledge but also cultural and societal norms through social interactions. Baldwin notes, “[T]he crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society” (“A Talk to Teachers” 326). He provides an example in Germany during World War II, noting that children who were born and educated under the governance of the Third Reich came to see and understand themselves within the ideology that their education advocated (Baldwin “A Talk to Teachers” 326). Critical pedagogue Henry Giroux reaffirms this examination of education as a tool of socialization and a means of furthering an adopted ideology: “Mass culture, teacher training institutions, and the

power of the state all play a powerful role in pressuring teachers to give unquestioning support to the basic assumptions of the wider dominant culture” (Giroux 55). For this reason, Baldwin tells instructors that they must re-examine their pedagogy and their goals as educators to determine their roles within the educational system. With black children as students, educators must consider how their teaching can affect their students’ perspectives of the world that surrounds them.

Baldwin, again in line with Giroux, sees historical reflection as a means of helping educators and students alike to see how history can be socially constructed to serve a dominant narrative that dehumanizes black people. He suggests that black children do not know their history because schools do not prioritize teaching them their history, leading them to see themselves as presented in their oppressor’s world view. Just as education can serve as a socialization tool of the state, it can serve as a means of liberation, implying that self-aware black children undermine the American social structure that aims to keep them in their subjugated place. Giroux notes,

This critical attentiveness to one’s own history represents an important element in examining the socially constructed sources underlying one’s formative process. To become aware of the process of historical self-formation indicates an important beginning in breaking through the taken-for-granted assumptions that legitimize existing institutional arrangements. (57)

Here, Giroux highlights how history impacts the ways in which people see each other as we tend to use socially constructed knowledge to figure out who we are and who other people are. Giroux quotes Jean-Paul Sartre in saying “You become what you are in the context of how others have made you” (qtd. in Giroux 57). Schools and universities, with this in mind, can help students to

think critically about the power structures in which they operate and how they have been taught to view themselves, their friends, and their families. Essentially, educators must help students to re-evaluate American history to gain a better understanding of who they truly are. Baldwin understands this idea of history as a tool of dehumanization and subjugation and concerns himself with not only how the normalized narrative of American history affect black children but also white children, especially concerning who they believe themselves to be:

If...one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody's history, you must lie about it all. If you have to lie about my real role here, if you have to pretend that I hoed all that cotton just because I loved you, then you have done something to yourself. You are mad. ("A Talk to Teachers" 329)

Having all children re-examine America's historical narrative serves to benefit not only black children but the country. A constant theme in Baldwin's work is his preoccupation with the souls of white folk as he says they are part of a violent system that they themselves are victims to, though they are unaware; America as a country suffers because white Americans do not know who they truly are.

To put Baldwin's solutions into practice, educators—especially Rhetoric and Composition scholars—must help black students to develop their critical thinking for them to observe and analyze the world around them and to determine what action they will take in order

to change the system that seeks their oppression and demise. Baldwin notes early on in his speech,

The purpose of education...is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a true God in heaven or not. To ask questions of this universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. (“A Talk to Teachers” 326)

To think critically about the world and to act on that learned knowledge is to build a society where people know who they are and act accordingly. Educators must foster this type of critical thinking through dialogue with their black students. Paulo Freire specifically sees dialogue and problem-posing teaching strategies as ways of encouraging students to change the world that they critically examine. To educators, he notes,

The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people. Utilizing certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action. (Freire 95-6)

Ultimately, educators can change society by encouraging their students to envision themselves as agents of change, reassuring them that their worldviews are valuable and can serve as grounds for their own action. Baldwin says to his audience of educators that they must tell their black students how their awareness of their identities is dangerous within a country that conspires against them and that despite any “apprehension of their future which with every hour grows

grimmer and darker,” they have agency (“A Talk to Teachers” 331). He directly states, “[I]t is up to [them] to change these standards for the sake of the life and the health of the country” (Baldwin “A Talk to Teachers” 331-2). In this manner, educators are the key to societal change as they help students to embrace their power in order to benefit the country.

Though Baldwin does empower educators in his speech, he is also careful to critique educators’ intents in teaching black children. He asserts, “...well-meaning white liberals place themselves in great danger when they try to deal with Negroes as though they were missionaries” (Baldwin “A Talk to Teachers” 330). Not only is this white savior intent problematic, but it also maintains the dehumanization of black people as well as the socially constructed view of black people as less than. If an educator sees themselves as separate from the worlds of their students, then they cannot create an effective dialogic classroom environment. Freire notes, “...[R]evolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of ‘salvation,’ but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their *objective situation* and their *awareness* of that situation...” (95). In dialogue, there is no hierarchy between educators and students; white educators must be vigilant in reconsidering their roles as educators. Do they serve the institution of education and its intended purpose? Or do they subvert their predetermined role to engage their students in meaningful critical thinking and action?

As black men, women, and children are killed in state-sponsored violence, black students—children and adults—must come to terms with what power they have to effect change in the progression of society. Rhetoric and Composition scholars, with some influence from critical pedagogy, can aid in their students’ awareness of their situations in order to drive them to action within the writing classroom. Baldwin reinforces concepts from critical pedagogy, allowing for Rhetoric and Composition scholars to draw from this speech in considering how to

approach teaching minority populations and how to reconsider their roles as educators given the tumultuous realities their students must face inside, outside, and at the door of educational institutions. Baldwin's political landscape in the '60s demanded it, and today's political landscape demands it even more. Otherwise, this country will meet its demise. To end, Baldwin concludes, "America is not the world and if America is going to become a nation, she must find a way—and this child must help her to find a way to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy which this child represents. If this country does not find a way to use that energy, it will be destroyed by that energy" ("A Talk to Teachers" 332).

#### CONSIDERATIONS OF BLACK ENGLISH

Within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, the topic of African American Vernacular English (AAVE or Black English) and its use within first-year writing classrooms is oft discussed largely because scholars have begun seeing it as a language rather than a derivative and/or perverse version of Standard American English. The discourse surrounding the purpose and effectiveness of Black English is nothing new. James Baldwin wrote and spoke about Black English and how its origins in the Black Church as well as its relationship to standard English. The current scholarly discussions concerning Black English's use in the college classroom and within writing centers would certainly benefit from a closer reading of some of Baldwin's work on the topic; he wrote and spoke on the topic, not from the role of an overzealous and idealistic educator but as a black, America-loving writer and activist who continually saw that white Americans' denigration of Black English denied the overtly American nature of this language. In order to bring Baldwin into this conversation concerning Black English, I will detail the major points of two of his works: "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is," an editorial published in the

*New York Times* in 1979; and “Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” a speech delivered to students at Wayne State University in 1980. Although Baldwin is not often discussed as a Rhetoric and Composition scholar, I argue that much of his work deals with concepts and issues that we are still discussing today within the field, and as scholars, we should take more time to consider what Baldwin’s body of work has to offer in informing our understandings of teaching English and writing in America’s current political landscape.

In his editorial piece, Baldwin posits that without Black English, white Americans would not sound the way that they do for two reasons: for the sake of othering and for the sake of appropriation. He notes, “Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other but from different tribes” (“If Black English...” E19). In itself, Black English is uniquely American, a product of various African peoples having to survive amongst one another while enduring chattel slavery in a white world. However, the language isn’t deemed to be American but rather as “colloquial” or “informal,” implying that Black English is subpar in relationship to standard English, whatever that term encapsulates. In this relationship, Black English is used to other those who speak it, stigmatizing its speakers and creating racial implications with the use of a specific language. Baldwin argues, “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him” (“If Black English...” E19). In othering users of a specific language, a dominant language is preferred that does not describe well the experiences and circumstances of the Others, making them less understood yet frequently identified as Others by users of the dominant language (in this case, standard English). Baldwin, here, is getting at the political nature of language and how both written and spoken words carry sociopolitical value. Though

standard English and Black English share terminology, the latter is rooted in cultural background while the former is often considered to be “objective” and “common” for English speakers. June Jordan, in “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” argues that despite so many other countries encouraging, and not at all hindering, linguistic diversity amongst citizens, “[C]ompulsory education in America compels accommodation to exclusively white forms of ‘English.’ White English, in America, is ‘Standard English’” (60). Jordan’s point reinforces Baldwin’s assertion that standard English is a whitewashed English, a language that is taught to be the most effective way to communicate although few people fully employ it in written and oral communication. It is whitewashed because it is masquerading as the “purest” form of English, one that has not been influenced by any languages that have been othered.

In deeming standard English to be “common,” white Americans are denying their own cultural backgrounds; Baldwin says that such is the “price of the ticket” for white Americans to be considered white: “The price of the ticket was to cease being Irish, cease being Greek, cease being Russian, cease being whatever you had been before, and to become ‘white.’ And *that* is why this country says it’s a white country and really believes it” (“Dishonest” 156). Whiteness encourages othering those who are non-white, and in doing so, any language that is deemed non-white is belittled, even languages that are mixtures of European languages and English. The definition of whiteness bends to include various European ethnicities if and only if those specific ethnic identities are denied in favor of adopting “white” as the adequate label of American ethnicity. So when Baldwin says, “I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound,” he is emphasizing that white Americans wouldn’t prefer standard English without various other local American languages to subjugate as incorrect and unintelligible.

Though Black English is othered, it is also appropriated, when convenient and without acknowledgement, by white Americans. Such practice flies in the face of users of Black English who have been denied opportunities because of how they employ the language in their oral and written communication. Baldwin offers examples of terminology originating from Black English being appropriated in describing (white) American concepts:

*Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on! Beat to his socks*, which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which the phenomenon was, largely, composed of *uptight*, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to *get down*, to get *with it*, doing their *thing*, doing their despairing best to be *funky*, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing—we *were* funky, baby, like *funk* was going out of style. ("If Black English..." E19)

Baldwin's examples may be more representative of the period in which he wrote the editorial piece, but his sentiments remain relevant. Quite often, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary will announce new additions to their dictionaries, many terms having originated in Black English that were eventually adopted by the white mainstream once they were trendy. A continuing conversation amongst white listeners of hip hop and rap music (and even non-black people of color) is whether they can use the term "nigga," even requiring explanation as to why not. Vershawn Ashanti Young says that "The Internet, among other mass media, as well as the language habits of America's ever-growing diverse ethnic populations, be affecting how

everybody talk and write now, too” (“Should Writers...” 69). With America having such a diverse population, it’s completely understandable that terms and phrases from Black English would seep into the white mainstream, “...incorporatin, and appropriatin, black language styles” as Young says (“Should Writers...” 69). However, the problem arises when the appropriation and adoption of those terms and phrases ignore the origins; if Black English is acceptable with a white speaker, then the language is not the problem. The speaker is the problem; remember, Baldwin said that language reveals the speaker: “The Argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language” (“If Black English...” E13).

Black English functions as a means for black speakers to describe their personal experiences and serves as a much better method of doing so than standard English. In describing a functional role of language, Baldwin notes the following: “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged)” (“If Black English...”). By naming their surroundings and describing their experiences through language, speakers are given power in naming and then changing and resisting their world. Baldwin emphasizes this same sentiment in his aforementioned speech:

You describe your environment in order to control it, in order to find out what it is, in order to find out who and where you are... You got to find out the reality which surrounds you. You got to be able to describe it. You got to be able to describe your mother and your father and your uncles and your junkie cousin. If you aren’t able to describe it, you will not be able to survive it. (“Dishonest” 157)

To this point, Baldwin has emphasized that standard English is dependent upon the existence of Black English for othering and for appropriation. Now, Baldwin identifies the use of language as

a means of survival, a precursor to action. With this idea, Baldwin echoes Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where the Brazilian critical pedagogue sees language and action as interconnected when teaching students to be critically reflective of their personal experiences, putting emphasis into dialogic teaching strategies. Freire suggests, “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (87). I argue that speaking a “true word” cannot be accomplished with the dominant language that does not reflect the experiences of those speaking it; Black English represents a method of achieving that “true word” in practice. Freire adds, “If it is speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (88). Baldwin’s argument concerning the role of Black English for its speakers includes its political nature but also its liberating nature. If you can name your world, if you can identify your circumstances, you can change them; you already have the means to survive them. Walter Ong also reiterates this concept when considering orality: “[N]ames do give human beings power over what they name: without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand” (33). Ong’s analysis is situated more in the consideration of oral traditions with gaining and sharing knowledge, but his analysis does support Baldwin and Freire and their assertions that naming gives power to language and to the speaker. Baldwin and Freire converge on this concept of the interconnectedness of language and action on the basis of using the “true word.”

If language can function as a method for revolution and liberation, then it is a political tool. I’ve briefly discussed how language is used as a political tool in othering speakers, but it also serves as a tool of white Americans to feign little understanding of those who do not usually

communicate in standard English. To clarify, justification for not understanding Black English is often given relative to Standard English, implying that the latter is more effective for communication for all Americans more so than the former; this inability to understand extends to black people, black cultural heritage, and black experiences. On this point, Baldwin states, “It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (“If Black English...” E13). If a speaker is well versed in Black English and much less comfortable in speaking and writing in standard English, her identity is revealed to those who adopt the dominant language of standard English. Because her identity is revealed, she is an Other, and white Americans can justify their lack of understanding of her personal experiences via a breakdown in communication rather than not attempting to understand someone who falls outside of the definition of whiteness.

When Kendrick Lamar used his song “Alright” to voice his protest of police brutality, Fox News anchors took little time in taking a quote out of context to voice their displeasure with him and labeling him an opponent of law enforcement. When Jacqueline Jones Royster read a piece written in Black English for an academic audience, her colleagues felt no guilt in telling her—arguably through a micro-aggression—that it was good to hear her “authentic” voice.<sup>4</sup> When there are calls from white people for the film and Netflix series *Dear White People* to be cancelled because it is “racist,” it is obvious there was no attempt to understand the significance of either piece as discussions of racism in America. White Americans are pretty spectacular at making assumptions and misconceptions from a limited understanding of those who are not white, and language helps in this goal because it allows them to identify those who they do not

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<sup>4</sup> See “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own” by Jacqueline Jones Royster.

have to attempt to understand because their experiences are outside of the scope of whiteness. Baldwin asserts, “We, the blacks, can be described by others, but we are forbidden to describe ourselves” (“Dishonest” 158).

Some scholars and educators argue that by teaching students, whether they be adolescents or college age, to use standard English within academic and professional environments and Black English (or whatever they may speak at home) in informal settings that we can offer our students the ability to code switch, or to learn another language, without devaluing their home language. Though this argument may have good intentions, it is quite problematic. In voicing how, Vershawn Ashanti Young argues, “[W]hile many advocates of code switching also claim to be anti-racists who would never seek to reinstitute racial subordination, they nonetheless translate the racist logic of early twentieth century legal segregation into a linguistic logic that undergirds twenty-first century language instruction” (“Nah, We Straight” 55). Essentially, this argument, that may have good intentions in teaching (for my focus here and Young’s as well) black students to code switch based on the context, further implies that standard English is the socially valued language and that Black English, with many of its speakers being black, is not deemed to be an effective language for communication, thereby implying that its speakers are not valued. In teaching that Black English is subordinate to standard English, white Americans and any other instructors who adopt standard English as the dominant language further the use of language as a political tool in reinforcing the power of whiteness through the forced teaching of standard English and its prescribed conventions. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks, after reading a poem by Adrienne Rich, considers how standard English is the language of the oppressor: “[W]hen I first read these words, and now, they made me think of standard English, of learning to speak against black vernacular, against the ruptured

and broken speech of a dispossessed and displaced people. Standard English is not the speech of exile. It is the language of conquest and domination” (168). Here, hooks acknowledges the adversely political nature of standard English and how it functions within America as a colonizer, though many languages existed before it and are presented alongside it. Under standard English, Black English risks being dominated and conquered.

Young succinctly points out how those scholars and educators who argue for teaching code switching as revolutionary are simply a cog in the wheel that they seem to fervently denounce: “...the very anti-racist, liberal-minded individuals who claim to oppose racial discrimination are the same ones who unconsciously perpetuate it. Instead of attacking racism, they attempt to teach black folks how to cope with it” (“Nah, We Straight” 56). Much like Baldwin, Young undermines standard English’s dominance in education and communication because of its use as a tool of whiteness, furthering the aims of white supremacy.

Specific to education, Baldwin identifies why white instructors work to deny validity to Black English in their classrooms. Recall Baldwin’s emphasis on Black English as a means of giving voice to the experiences and circumstances of its speakers, especially black people. Baldwin, again in “Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” recognizes the separation between white instructors and their black students:

I was dealing with cops before I was seven years old and sleeping in basements before I was ten, watching my mother and my father, my brothers and my sisters, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, living as though every day was going to be our last. Now, how exactly do you expect me to explain that, to describe that to Greer Garson when she comes to teach me English? There is an

irreducible gap between my teacher and my experience, between my teacher and my education. (155)

Because they use different languages, the typical white female instructor—whom Baldwin provides a caricature of with the 1940s British actress Greer Garson—cannot fully understand the personal experience of the black students she teaches. And the black students should not fully adopt her teachings of standard English as this language cannot help them to fully articulate their experiences to white people, though that is exactly what educators and scholars imply in advocating for teaching code switching. Baldwin notes, “The brutal truth is that the bulk of the white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except at this could serve white purposes” (“If Black English...” E19). In his criticism of the education of black children, Baldwin shares his honest observation in how education has truly worked in this country, giving further support to his point for the role of language in America. How does the teaching of standard English serve to benefit white Americans? The denial and devaluing of Black English certainly serves the purposes of white supremacy but also encourages black students to deny their own cultural and linguistic heritage in favor of assimilating into whiteness, or at least attempting to do so. Finishing his considerations of education’s effect on black children, Baldwin states, “A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white” (“If Black English...”). By teaching black children to code switch or teaching them to adopt standard English rather than Black English, educators are inadvertently teaching black students to loathe themselves, to leave behind the identity that they should be proud of in favor of aligning themselves with whiteness for comfort and for safety, though neither can truly happen. Language

remains a political tool that can be used to force black children to surrender their power in naming themselves and their personal experiences.

Standard English remains a political tool from the white supremacy tool box, and it cannot be used to undermine whiteness or its adjoining social constructs. To further support that point, I look to Audre Lorde. Though her speech “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” pertains to her experience at an academic conference where organizers failed to engage various female perspectives for different panel discussions outside of those that are considered to be “for women,” her popular phrase here can be applied to discussing the ill-advised task of teaching black students to embrace standard English as a political tool:

[T]hose of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference...know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (113)

The last sentence in the above excerpt highlights the ineffectiveness of teaching code switching while also supporting Baldwin’s argument for Black English. Standard English cannot be used a tool for revolution because it is the master’s tool, a tool of white supremacy. It works in identifying those who are not white, revealing the identity of the speaker, and furthering the aims of white supremacy by deeming the language to be “pure.” Baldwin offers, instead, that we use a homegrown tool, Black English, rather than a tool of the oppressor. With Black English, its speakers can use language to lead to action, can empower themselves with the ability to articulate their experiences, and to liberate themselves; all of these can lead to genuine change because the master—white supremacy—cannot control a tool which it did not conceive or

develop; the best is can do is stigmatize its use and its users, but when students are taught to think critically about who they are and how they communicate, they stand a better chance of effective communication and understanding the role of language rather than simply adopting the conventions of a socially constructed standard.

The origins of Black English are rooted in basic survival. In his editorial, Baldwin states, “A language comes into existence by means of brutul (sic.) necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey” (“If Black English...” E19). He shares a general example from his personal life, noting that there was a time when his family needed to convey to him the weight living in a white man’s world and chose to do so in their language, for white people wouldn’t have understood the meaning. Scholar bell hooks considers thoughtfully how Black English originated from fear to become resistance: “Needing the oppressor’s language to speak with one another they nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination” (170). Black English is a site of resistance, a language with meanings all its own that its speakers can understand without knowing standard English. Considering the general origins of Black English in slavery, codes were also present in work and gospel songs and in tools used on the plantation in order to communicate amongst one another information that overseers and masters didn’t need to know, or really shouldn’t know. The use of codes—signifiers and the signified—continues in today’s use of Black English whether in the home or in popular culture. The term “picnic,” to some, may render an image of a casual outdoor outing with refreshments, but for some, “picnic” conjures images of public lynchings (“pick a nigger” or picanniny) where white attendees would bring the entire family to enjoy a delicious spread while watching the latest nigger(s) be burned, mutilated, castrated, tortured, and cut to pieces for souvenirs. In this example, standard English fails to

wholly describe the cultural and historical implications of a single word and its use. This is how it fails its users, and yet, it is still considered to be the most effective, common language in America, though its effectiveness cannot be proven. June Jordan emphasizes the importance of preserving and recognizing Black English: “Black English is not exactly a linguistic buffalo, but we should understand its status as an endangered species, as a perishing, irreplaceable system of community intelligence, or we should expect its extinction, and along with that, the extinguishing of much that constitutes our own proud, and singular identity” (59). The question remains how do we preserve this tool of revolution and further engage students in it when much of academia (and society) prefers to dictate when and where Black English can be appropriately used? Preserving Black English means to preserve a multifaceted cultural identity that is unique to America.

Young offers code meshing as a means of countering the teaching of code switching. He argues, “Instead of prescribing how folks should write or speak, I say we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously” (“Should Writers...” 65). Young’s approach to writing and communication instruction involves having students to think critically about not only their own language and culture but also those with whom they communicate to better understand their culture and even their experiences. In doing so, standard English is identified as monolithic and somewhat static while code meshing allows for the blending of different languages and dialects, a plurilingual context for written and oral communication. Young also views code meshing as something that is already happening today, whenever we talk, type, text, email, etc. He is simply advocating that we actively teach it. In identifying instances of code meshing, Young notes,

“This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it’s sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there ain’t just one way, sho nuff more than one way, to communicate formally” (“Should Writers...” 67). Baldwin would likely support Young’s argument because having students confront various cultural perspectives in order to encourage effective communication would allow students to think critically about how standard English has been used in America despite the numerous ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages that are present within this county. In doing so, America’s history of racism and its denial of individual cultures (in favor of a whitewashed American identity) would manifest itself threadbare in language, and students could better determine what role language plays in their various parts of their lives.

Throughout this paper, I have repeatedly emphasized just how well Baldwin considers Black English with American society, and I have argued that we should be revisiting Baldwin’s work in order to determine what else he has to offer the field of Rhetoric and Composition. His deliberations on Black English fit well into current scholarly conversation about the roles and functions of language in society. There is room in the field for Baldwin’s perspective on the education of black students in the midst of an America that was built to harm and conquer them.

#### THE ROLE OF THE WRITER

Baldwin is well known as an American author, and he frequently noted how seriously he understood his role as a writer within society, seeing it not as a profession but as a responsibility. In an earlier section, I noted Baldwin’s use of the term “writer” and how he likely used the term to refer to those who write professionally, but the value that he associated with the writer within

any given community or within the larger society is applicable for writing students, as their use of the English language is shaped by their purpose in using it and their experiences. It's important to consider the power that comes from using language to identify and criticize the world around us. Both Freire and Baldwin noted that there is inherent power in language that can drive people to action, making words more than words but rather catalysts of passion and engagement. In this section, I will discuss three previously published pieces of Baldwin that relate to the role of the writer. In doing so, I will be considering how Baldwin's discussion of the roles and responsibilities of writers impacts approaches to teaching student writers, especially those coming from marginalized backgrounds. With composition pedagogy being included within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, there is much Baldwin can offer these scholars in how they address teaching the aforementioned students and with what attitudes these scholars should be viewing this kind of work. Writing classrooms serve as epicenters for discussions related to truth, argument, persuasion, and language, and these topics are critical points of focus for what students are encountering in various ways in their daily lives.

"A Word from Writer Directly to Reader" was published in 1959 in a fiction anthology focused on writing fiction in the 1950s. The editor of the anthology prompted the contributors to the anthology to consider what makes writing fiction for the '50s to be different from writing in a different decade. This piece served as Baldwin's response, and in it Baldwin focuses on how writers have a great deal of responsibility in telling the truth about what they see and who they live amongst within society. Baldwin notes, "I suppose that it has always been difficult to be a writer. Writers tell us so; and so does the history of any given time or place and what one knows of the world's indifference. But I doubt that there could ever have been a time which demanded more of the writer than do these present days" ("A Word" 8). This statement reflects Baldwin's

observations concerning the Civil Rights movement and associated protests and events that were fatal for some citizens and his expectations of a writer to examine and share these truths associated with such sociopolitical unrest in America. Here, Baldwin identifies his perception of how political the act of writing can be, somewhat sharing a point with Freire who considered the political impact and significance of literacy in affecting political and economic power.

Baldwin delves more into what it means to be a writer, what a writer should be aiming to accomplish. Concerning the writer, he asserts, “The private life, his own and that of others, is the writer’s subject—his key and ours to his achievement. Nothing, I submit, is more difficult than deciphering what the citizens of this time and place actually feel and think. They do not know themselves” (Baldwin “A Word” 9). Writers are responsible to their fellow citizens in their telling of truth, in their telling of what citizens think and feel despite them not knowing themselves fully. Such tasks seem to be an incredibly heavy burden for writers to bear, and I’m sure many student writers—and even professional writers—would not see themselves as prepared for this challenge of telling the truth of their people. Baldwin qualifies this burden by noting that writers are mining their own lives and experiences to tell the truth about their fellow citizens, almost acting as ethnographers to divulge and brandish the thoughts, history, culture, and language of a population within a specific moment in time. But to achieve this task, writers must be prepared in thinking critically about what they see, hear, read, etc. Baldwin identifies the significance of critical thinking to the role of the writer when saying that the writer must “decipher” from their experiences and perceptions, so the writer must understand what is significant to share from a large amount of metaphorical data collection.

Considering Baldwin’s assertions about the writer in the scope of teaching marginalized students, pedagogy for writing students must be tuned into helping students to see their

worldviews as valuable and important (a simple acknowledgment that they are often taught contrarily through the media and through an education system that benefits white supremacy) in order to help them to think critically about what they see and experience. It's an impossible task to tell students, without proper discussion, to write what they know, to write the truth without first guiding them into seeing themselves, their work, and their observations as valuable when they have largely been taught to write for what an instructor wants. When writing students see their insight as meaningful, instructors can then help them to critique and decipher what they have experienced to consider the truth that must be shared. Once students are encouraged in this manner, instructors are better positioned to prepare their students to discuss the social unrest that impacts their lives and America more generally. To end his short passage, Baldwin states,

What the times demand, and in an unprecedented fashion, is that one *be*—not seem—outrageous, independent, anarchical. That one be thoroughly disciplined—as a means of being spontaneous. That one resist at whatever cost the fearful pressures placed on one to lie about one's own experience. For in the same way that the writer scarcely ever had a more uneasy time, he has never been needed more. ("A Word" 9)

According to Baldwin, writers must be honest about their experiences in order to fully engage with the role of the writer. Though the role is not an easy one, it is absolutely necessary to tell the truth in a country full of people who constantly lie to and silence themselves.

In this essay, Baldwin doesn't focus on a specific genre of writing (despite the essay being published in an anthology of fiction), but he is solely focused on how important and how powerful truth in words and language can be when a writer wields them purposefully. Here, the purpose relates more to helping fellow citizens discover what they have long known and tried to

forget about themselves, about their country, about their families, about their countrymen: that we cannot rely on a dominant narrative to tell the truth of everyone in a diverse nation. Any narrative that seems to be devoted to that purpose must be questioned and critiqued to determine who benefits from the belief of such a narrative. As Baldwin and Freire have stated before, there is power in naming your experiences; so, it can be disempowering to allow white supremacy to name your experiences for you and then to continue to perceive yourself through that lens. This is an issue that writing instructors must tackle in teaching students from marginalized populations in order to have students see the power that they have in naming what they see and experience in their writing.

In “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” Baldwin offers more insight into how black writers have had to struggle to find their words and their voice in a country that has not encouraged or supported them but has actually sought to actively destroy them. He has repeatedly emphasized in multiple texts that standard English is a political tool that supports white supremacy, making America’s educational system an institution supporting the aims of white supremacy by forcing nonwhite students to describe themselves with and to use the language of the Oppressor. Baldwin notes, “The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white. It is a trick bag, because they know perfectly well that I can never become white” (Baldwin “Language” 143). Though minority students are pushed to adhere to white supremacist educational ideals, they are trapped in a paradox where they are attempting to ignore their culture in order to be “white” although the objective itself is unattainable and only allows for them to feel even more isolated in a country that does not aim to see them succeed. Understanding how education can further the agenda of white supremacy, Baldwin suggests that we, black people, educate our own children instead of leaving the task to white educators. Now,

an uninformed, self-righteous, and/or offended white reader might categorize such an assertion as racist; however, Baldwin is simply arguing here that white educators cannot be trusted to teach black youth when they haven't even taught their own children: "How can we expect people who cannot educate their *own* children to educate anybody else?" (Baldwin "Language" 144). The evidence of white educators not teaching their own white children is present in the dominant, white-washed narrative offered in multiple subjects, whether it be history, sociology, psychology, music, literature, and so on. I glean from Baldwin's point here that he would not trust white educators to teach black students how to write their experiences, how to write their observances, how to write in their native tongue, how to convey to readers what it truly means to be who they are and to live how they live.

Through all of this discussion of white supremacy and considerations of how race impacts language and the teaching of writing, Baldwin drives home the point that education—though used as a political tool—can be a tool of freedom. Marginalized students are constantly having to deal with outward forces affecting their home lives, and it becomes even more exhausting for them to battle the institutional forces that mitigate their humanity in school systems and universities. But if teachers and instructors prepare them for these forces and identify how these societal and institutional issues affect their lives, then students can learn to exercise their agency in their education to counteract the systemic oppression in America that seeks their death and downfall. Concerning black children, Baldwin notes,

There is a reason that no one wants our children educated. When we attempt to do it ourselves, we find ourselves up against a vast machinery of racism which infects the country's entire system of education. I know the machinery is vast,

ruthless, cunning, and thinks of nothing, in fact, but itself, which means us, because we are a threat to the machinery. (“Language” 143)

In order to move forward in educating all students, educators have to acknowledge that our education system is not set up for our marginalized students to succeed, and once educators know this, they must put such knowledge into action when critically considering how their own teachings and lessons have impacted students and how they can be supporting the causes of white supremacy.

Baldwin speaks about black children in this way because he has seen the effects of racism in his community, and he knows just how powerfully intertwined white supremacy is in not only our education system but our political and justice systems. To have students call out these power structures that defame them and kill them is to undermine their purpose, to be a threat to that machinery. Baldwin says that we cannot resort to previous methods to fight these power structures: “We have already lived through a slave rebellion. We cannot pick up guns, because they’ve got the guns. We cannot hit those streets again, because they’re waiting for us. We have to do something else” (“Language” 143). That “something else” is the teaching of writing, doing so for our students so that they are able to recognize the power of language, the power in their language. Writing will help students to discover their voices and to learn to listen to others different than theirs. It’s about exposing the harsh truths of the world so that our students may see fit to change them.

In “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” Baldwin continues to contend with the use of language and how that language reflects the writer’s experiences. He uses William Shakespeare and his play *Julius Caesar* as examples of how Shakespeare’s writing is indicative of his experiences and his time, noting that his own use of language should also be representative of his

experiences and his time. By exemplifying Shakespeare—a well-revered writer long considered to be the standard in English literature—Baldwin effectively contends with the primacy of the King’s English as he compares it to the language he uses in his speech and in his writing.

In his critique of himself and of his use of the English language to match his experiences, Baldwin argues his negatives experiences with the English language may have been his own fault. He says, “My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault” (Baldwin “Hating” 67). His discussion of Shakespeare and the English language precedes this quote, leading Baldwin to consider how Shakespeare was not simply repeating the King’s English but making the language fit into the situations and settings he created in his writing, drawing from his own lived experiences even in creating historical portrayals of characters. Shakespeare was simply devoting his art to the people and the events that he recognized, and Baldwin reaffirms that as the role of the poet, the writer, the artist. Baldwin says succinctly, “The artist is not free to do what he wants to do; the artist is free to do what he has to do” (Baldwin & Giovanni 75). In this instance, what the artist must do is share the experiences of his people with their idioms and figurative language.

Following the previous excerpt, Baldwin continues, “Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test” (Baldwin “Hating” 67). Here, Baldwin asserts how his use of English had been only performative, had not been authentic, but he considers that this may have been his own fault because he did not challenge its use and challenge himself to adapt it. Within this self-

critique, Baldwin is arguing that we as writers can retool the English language to fit our aims, to work within our chosen contexts for that language to be better representative of us as writers. He finds “witnesses” to this challenge in Shakespeare but also in his black ancestors, noting that they too made the language suit their lives as a means of endurance in a “hostile” place (Baldwin “Hating” 67-68). Freire echoes these same sentiments when arguing that educators must understand the “generative themes” of the people. These themes are relative to the people’s culture, and their language is based in that culture and their experiences. In order to comprehend that language, one must learn the culture and experiences that are rooted in that language.

To end his discussion of the relationship between the English language and life-shaping experiences, Baldwin aligns himself with Shakespeare in emphasizing the role of the writer in speaking honestly and authentically for the society in which he lives. In various pieces, Baldwin has explained that a writer is not simply devoted to herself but must also be devoted to the experiences and lives of the people who bore her, must be committed to telling those stories in order to capture and share the essence of her people through the written word in order to better document these experiences for the future and to accurately describe ways of life that may be unfamiliar to those living outside of such communities. Here, Baldwin continues to describe his coming to understand how he could use the English language to suit his needs:

[T]he language with which I had grown up had certainly not been the King’s English. An immense experience had forged this language; it had been (and remains) one of the tools of a people’s survival...The authority of this language was in its candor, its irony, its density, and its beat: this was the authority of the language that produced me... (“Hating” 68)

Though Baldwin did not grow up using the King's English—and was early on intimidated by Shakespeare's highly revered and respected use of the language—he came to understand that the means of using English representative of his experience also served as a tool of survival. bell hooks, concerning this adaptation of language for survival, sees this use of language as a method for creating a community and for establishing political resistance (170). This notion couples well with Baldwin's discussion of Black English and his discussion here of realizing just how valuable his language is, just as valuable as Shakespeare's English. But above all, a writer must wield this language well in exhibiting the lives of her people, just as Baldwin and Shakespeare have done, despite "the lot of an American writer—to be part of a people who have ears to hear and hear not, who have eyes to see and see not" (Baldwin "Hating" 69). This country presented a challenge for Baldwin to produce writing for a country to was not wholly interested in hearing about itself and its shortcoming, yet Baldwin kept writing. This same fervor is what any writer, young and old, should have when utilizing the English language to describe the issues plaguing her communities and the obstacles standing in her way. Going further into this point, Baldwin argues, "[T]he responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him. The act of writing is the intention of it; the root of it is liberation" (Baldwin & Giovanni 82). This liberation is for the writer and their people, even those who wouldn't count themselves amongst the writer's company. Baldwin helps us to see the writer as more than a singular individual producing in a singular act but as a role fulfilled by a community.

Throughout this piece, Baldwin calls on Shakespeare, at first for stark comparison but later for linguistic unity, to help show how the English language is not a static entity but, instead, how it is a tool for those who use it. Doing so further demonstrates the unfounded and unnecessary stigma assigned to languages and dialects outside of Standard English. Baldwin

concisely argues throughout each short essay that the role of the writer is critical to the present and future of this country and that this role involves engaging an audience that may be resistant and maintaining honesty and authenticity in language and writing. This role is not simply for scholars and professional writers but also for the students in our first-year writing courses, the students in twelfth grade English, and even students practicing their letters in Kindergarten. As Baldwin repeats, writers are responsible to the people and the experiences that created them, and these writers can change the course of this country.

#### CONCLUSION

A recurring point that Baldwin shares is that the vast majority of white Americans do not know who they are, and until they learn who they are in the face of America's rich, torturous history, the country will suffer. In Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, he builds on this point by arguing that America is facing a bill that it is not able to pay, and I'd argue that the conflict and strife we're witnessing now in this country is the fulfillment of Baldwin's prophecy. This bill is past due, and this country has done very little to confront the conditions that have allowed and furthered racial discrimination and economic disparities. The fault of this failure lies in white Americans who have continued to ignore the fallacy of whiteness in order to profit and benefit from white privilege at the expense of people of color. I have given particular emphasis to African Americans, who remain at a disadvantage compared to the white descendants of explorers, colonists, abolitionists, slave owners, suffragettes, presidents, etc.

In this paper, I offer a possible means of addressing that history by highlighting Baldwin's writings as supplementary to the field of critical pedagogy. Through Freire's theory on education and knowledge, this field has much to offer educators who are concerned with

teaching minority populations how to harness their voices in the midst of a country that does not recognize them or their power. Baldwin's work aligns well with critical pedagogy as he was very much concerned with Black English, black writers, and the futures of black children in the midst of America's ability to stifle and kill those who undermine America's whiteness and singular white voice. Rhetoric and Composition scholars seem to be up to the task as the field uses the writing classroom to discuss more than writing but also the ways in which writing can affect the real world. These real-world effects tie in Freire's purpose in liberating students through dialogic learning and Baldwin's desire for change in America.

In a way, the writing of this thesis is in line with Baldwin's assertions concerning the role of the writer, effecting change with honesty and authenticity in language. And yet, this isn't enough. The current state of our country allows for misinformation to spread faster than facts; allows for mendacious elected politicians to be openly racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic through the use of dog whistle phrasing; allows for nearly half of Americans to ignore the humanity of those who do not resemble them in favor of a whiter, greater America; allows for a president to use Twitter to defend himself against a "malicious" press in spite of the First Amendment and any others who may disagree with his policies and values; allows for black women, men, and children to be killed by law enforcement without repercussions for the offending officers and to even be blamed for their own murders; and allows for an education system that feeds the school-to-prison pipeline though education is the "Great Equalizer." It's difficult to take up arms in helping this country to truly become better—through telling it about itself for the sake of growth—when you can see that this country doesn't appear to be open to that type of love and patriotism. And yet, if Baldwin was still alive, I'm sure he would be

encouraging us to continue to press on though the future appears bleak, though the burden of the writer is getting harder and harder to bear, though our love is met with spit, bullets, and violence.

So I write, not because it's my job to save this country from itself—because it surely is not—but because this is my country, just as it was Baldwin's, just as it is my black students', just as it is yours.<sup>5</sup> And if I am to be part of that resistance, then my writing should demonstrate how we as Americans can pull forward in this time of crisis. Your part in this resistance is engaging with the ideas herein that can help us to see just how prescient Baldwin's work is and how his views on writing and education, when enacted in practice, would benefit black students and other students of color who must be prepared to fight against the systemic oppression that functions to suppress and kill them. To paraphrase Baldwin, if we don't prepare our students to describe their experiences and to vocalize what they witness, these same students will be this country's undoing.

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<sup>5</sup> It's not black women's job to save everyone.

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