

# English at the Intersection

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how four faculty from the English BA program have responded to the crises faced during 2020 and beyond: the pandemic, the transition to online teaching, and the ongoing struggle for racial justice. First, Dr. Krauthamer provides an overview of the discussions held during our “Read and Meet” series of weekly, virtual conversations, including faculty from other programs and colleges, alumni, current students, and community members. With 24 sessions in 2020, this series resulted in a reading list of Black Lives Matter materials that we are using in our courses and the submission of a grant to the National Endowment of the Humanities. Dr. De presents how we can “understand and reconcile with some blind spots on conversations about identities and their intersections with the complexities of belonging in the 21st century.” In her words, she is concerned with “how can [one] facilitate a conversation on antiracism without also acknowledging the incompleteness of the ontology of race in the US.” Next, Dr. Turpin presents how she teaches by example, demonstrating how, in her words, “Black feminists are in a unique position to fight for a pedagogical practice that is socially progressive so that the next generation of academics will, indeed, come from the very classroom population from where we have taught.” Dr. Vilageliu-Diaz presents how these conversations can be extended to the community through her community writing project, “StoryTime,” a weekly program where children see and create their own stories. In her words, “There are many ways community-engaged writing and teaching can occur, and one of them is by collaborating with schools and supporting their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.”

**Keywords:** English department, academic expression, course design, intellectual agency, second language stories/narratives

## 1 Introduction

As a representation of diversity and inclusion, four faculty from the English BA Program provide their responses to the pandemic’s intersecting crises, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the remoteness of teaching, meeting, and living in isolation. Diversity comes in many forms: ethnicity, religion, age, technical expertise, class, gender identity, and so on. As English faculty, we represent diversity in all these areas and demonstrate, in this paper, how diversity strengthens the intersections of our teaching, service, and scholarship.

## 2 Methodology

In a nutshell, postcolonial critics have variously argued against archival representation and Eurocentric discursive practices. The mental exercise of researching, writing, and representing the writing through structure and method has been critically viewed of late. Ngugi



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wa Thiong had famously called for “DecolonizingtheMind” in his eponymously titledbookfrom1996. In our current endeavor and pedagogical-critical reflective practices, our team is mindful of the limitations of working within a western methodological apparatus, and our work—multipronged and variously situated in applying, changing, and doing the Humanities, and especially, cultural studies — is rooted in this envisioning about a revisionary methodological apparatus. The western1 tradition of knowledge-making is often a value-added activity (if so, then what?), objective, codified in method, positivistic and particular. Our approach is distinguished in this paper by being epistemologically rooted in experience, with perspectives from real people situated in the real world of the US academe, and centers on the questions we ask and the solutions we seek. Some questions we ask include, how can we be culturally sensitive, what are ways to be more inclusive, how can

We choose to put the geographic direction demarking ‘west’ through lower-casing ‘west’ instead of putting in a term in an upper case that contains and presupposes one kind of location and resource as the only valid one. We see the west as one among other geographic centers of knowledge and resource. we incorporate multiple voices in the telling of stories, and so forth. The answers we provide are various, diverse, and rooted in the ways we see the world unfolding around us in the midst of a pandemic.

Our process(-es) of disentangling and de-linking theories and structures of doing methodologies2 in a research paper of the kind we attempt here is a gesture indicative of a process that is radical, feminist, queer, and intersectional. In initiating and in retrospection about our ‘methodologies,’ it is apparent that our approaches question traditional western research fatigue guided by principles of labeling, structuring, containing, and restricting. Thus, the methodology and practice we reclaim here are gesturing toward anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and a departure from western research mechanisms guiding the Humanities and social sciences. Our paper incorporates a living archive integrating the tropes of storytelling and narrating, and advocates for creating spaces within the academic dialogue and teaching practices that are at once freeing, multiply located, and immersive.

Thus, Helene Krauthammer weaves experiences from a space with an uninhibited talk where faculty, students, and staff have expressed themselves, away from the structures of academic policing and surveillance. “Read and Meet” participants have advocated for a free space; an unstifled mode of expression and ally shipbuilding has characterized the continuity and renewal of this space. How can this free space be defined through methodology?

Aparajita De resonates with the need for ethical questioning and reinterrogating reflective practices in curricular design. How consciously are indigenous voices incorporated and how is the academic space constructed as a fluid, collaborative, and inclusive space that does not only replicate and reproduce canonical course offerings and structure but rethinks blind spots and biases of the teacher’s experiences and knowledge-making practices? At once emancipatory, ethically located, and a strong reflective exercise, Dr. De’s paper seeks the gaps to address how identity politics informs the overarching structures of western knowledge-making through course design, course offerings, and curricular design. How are courses made more inclusive? What are the limitations of teachers/instructors in becoming or, in resisting, agents of imperial (and colonial) knowledge practices?

For Cherie AnnTurpin, Black feminist practices and theories of articulation and belonging are intersectional, topical, and radical. They serve as an empowering tool in the

classroom by adding components of voice and agency and centralizing Blackness, and Black (queer) subjectivity instead of tracing Blackness with respect to Whiteness as the central defining structure. As Dr. Turpin indicates, her research and course offerings envision the Humanities and Cultural Studies not only as Black, female, and Queer but also Digital. This group of writers and academics advocate for a fluid medium of being and presenting, where research and writing are not the only modes of advocating intellectual agency and space, but only a part of the whole process.

Ada Vilageliu-Diaz has advocated for a space that incorporates multiple stories, voices, and languages—in the elementary school setting, her endeavors have led to a new kind of subjective articulation and may be seen as a space-clearing gesture for bilingual and multilingual voices. How do we contain and label such a space, except that it is experiential, diverse, and a powerful inclusive tool for children, young adults, parents, and guardians that legitimize their stories of belonging; their imaginative raptures find a voice in this space that sets them free and away from the restrictive label of “English for Second language speakers” or “Stories in Other languages” that occupy and create space for a kind of linguistic imperialism held together by the clutches of the English language.

Overall, our Methodologies are diverse, digital, and free. Come, join us...

We are intentionally choosing to write “methodologies” in the plural and all-in lower case. This is a gesture indicative of the diverse ways in developing our perspectives in rethinking English Studies and a departure from institutionalizing and/or centering on any one fixed methodology and apparatus over others.

### **3 Results**

#### **Read and Meet: How English faculty created an ongoing, safe space for challenging and unfiltered discussions on racism. (H. Krauthammer)**

In June 2020, in response to the BLM protests during the COVID - 19 pandemic, English faculty initiated the "Read and Meet" series of weekly, virtual discussions, centering around topics related to racism and education. By the beginning of 2021, there have been over 30 sessions, averaging about six participants each week, including faculty from other programs and colleges, alumni, current students, and community members. Using a Blackboard Collaborate Ultra virtual space named "The Changing Room", the English faculty developed a reading list of resources on the issues of racism, white supremacy, privilege, classism, caste, and other thought-provoking topics, with the intent to use these articles as a springboard for meaningful discussions, as well as resources for teaching our students. These unrecorded sessions allowed participants to openly reflect on the week's events. The small number of participants gives each person a voice and the opportunity to expound on their experiences. The diversity of the participants is notable, with each person representing a different race, religion, generation, ethnicity, musical preference, research interest, as well as other characteristics. These diverse aspects lead to conversations of multiple perspectives which give us a way of coping with these crises. It also provides a safe space where the participants can form personal bonds that led to several professional outcomes.

One outcome of these sessions was the submission of a proposal to the National Endowment of the Humanities for a planning grant to design an interdisciplinary minor entitled the Minor in Ethnicity and Racial Justice Studies (MERJS). This minor would provide students

with the same opportunities and exposure to diverse perspectives while allowing for collaborative work among colleagues coming from different disciplines. Though this particular grant was not awarded, the impetus from these sessions has created a sense of teamwork that has encouraged and motivated us to revise the initial grant and resubmit the grant in the next round, as well as pursue the process of developing this minor further.

Another outcome has been the interviews of at least two Read and Meet participants in Cherie Ann Turpin's award-winning podcast "At the Edge." Furthermore, an anthology is being planned in which participants will be collaborating on a collection of essays reflecting these conversations and discussions.

The Read and Meet sessions continue to serve as a forum where participants are all welcome to express their unfiltered viewpoints. Additionally, it has encouraged us to form a team that will continue to express these viewpoints to others in the form of presentations and publications such as this one, to develop these diverse perspectives.

### **Locating the Blind Spot: Through the Looking Glass in Rethinking Race Talk & English Course Offerings – A. De**

The Summer of 2020 was significant in locating and resituating my critical scholarship and mindful pedagogies. After writing our English Program's statement in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in June 2020, I became engrossed in understanding and reconciling some blind spots in conversations about identities and their intersections with the complexities of belonging in the 21st Century. These introspective analyses and readings were catalyzed no less by our Read and Meet conversations as they were by an unnamable bristly feeling I had, every time I attended a campus conversation around race and oppression.

The inquiry point for me was, how can I facilitate a conversation on antiracism without acknowledging the incompleteness of the ontology of race in the U.S? The Race talks we have within our campus, in the academy at large, and in professional literature meetings have overtly glossed over discussing the complex structure and cataloging of Brownness (See Murray-Johnson, 2019). In this recent essay the author advocates for a self-reflective and authentic discussion on the criticality of race. Additionally, as Kincaid (2017) had argued earlier, that discussion has conveniently erased, at least, in the South Asian American brown category, caste identities.

In retrospect, I thought of how I could locate myself in a contemporary US academy-- a South Asian Brown woman, heteronormative, upper-caste/class, studying postcolonial and diaspora studies while dabbling in the dynamics of US race studies. A quick review tells me that general opinion about a binarized conversation about race should include talking about the two archetypes that construct the conversation if it is to address oppression: White and Black not only conflate racial, ethnic, national, and religious identities within the homogenously constructed category White but mistakenly (?) glosses over the constitutive ontology of race in America. For George Yancy (2018), the social web of racial differential power constitutes a rampant denial of oppression and obfuscation of White privilege. Additionally, and in response to Yancy's observations, I want to argue that Blackness and its ontology in race talk critically overlooks socio-political contexts that separate settler-colonial identities from those that trace their ancestry to transatlantic slavery, not including the Caribbean and the African diasporas.

The other limitation of the racial binary was that the in-between, multi and biracial folk, and the Asian, Arab, and Latinx Hispanic and Indigenous populations get in the blind spots. Now, addressing all these inclusions and blindspots would be both ambitious and rambling here, so I want to focus on how the realization reflects my current practices regarding my identity: individual and collective, social and political.

As I noted the limitations of race talk on our campus, I started to be more critical of the material I was bringing into class, discussing with students, and seeing myself at the juncture of the BLM movement in action. Are pedagogy and instructional designing habits actively antiracist and conscious of the power of representation? Which voices dominated my course offerings and how decolonial and celebratory were my course offerings of the emancipatory voices from non-White spaces? How did I explore Blackness? or Brownness? Or, did I do it often enough? Did I bring in Queer poets of color? Indigenous writers, who celebrated the elements and wrote of the genocide? I have included a list, by no means, exhaustive, embedded like a quilt of diverse and indigenous voices of artists that were also questioning their spaces of articulation and why they are there. Perhaps our student leaders, in the center, need to know that there are these resources, and as their learning facilitator, I needed to frequently raise awareness of them.

Following a critical, self-reflexive decentering of the spaces of my relative privileges, I started to listen critically; I developed listening and note-taking habits while online to establish a collaborative, critical, and respectfully appreciative avenue for resources, information, and is the intellectual anchor for a diverse set of students. My practice did not go unnoticed in my Fall classes. Some students acknowledged that I listen and remember to come back. I acknowledge. That visibility, even within a remote class setting, initiated by listening in and responding to an individual as an individual, has had positive results so far. It has also created a community of people who feel that we are motivated by that feeling. They come back to my class and mention that they appreciate that I care.

While classroom dynamics and hierarchies are beyond this discussion's scope, I have felt that critical listening habits are informing and revising (or recovering) my moral psychology rooted in my caste-identity and the colonial, Eurocentric baggage of my aesthetic consciousness. My empathizing and becoming active with students' needs, respecting cross-cultural boundaries, and critically situating power structures are part of this practice. In my cultural identity paradigm, gendered listening is also associated with caste-identity; diffidence is both (upper) caste inflected and gendered, though not transmitted in caste outgroups.

For a South Asian brown teacher from the upper castes in a heterogeneous Historically Black College & University (HBCU) classroom, listening to Black voices involves negotiating and acknowledging centuries of Anti Blackness within the South Asian community, in the native and host diasporas; in being critically conscious of caste privileges, and develop a fair amount of willingness to be humble. As I grow to acknowledge my visibility and relative privileges within the racial hierarchy, perhaps the ethics of being human is something that I will continue to renew every moment through these practices. For me, connecting with my critical mass of students does not put me as a cultural outsider anymore. It draws out my ability to reflect and evolve along lines that can make me stand stronger and develop a better mooring of who I can be.

## **Classroom Space and Principles of Social Justice and Development of Selfhood – C. Turpin**

In order to teach by example, and to evolve, we, who consider our presence in the classroom to somehow reflect a feminist consciousness, especially within the context of an urban, majority people-of-color classroom, must seek out and develop strategies of teaching that demonstrate a transformation from being agents of racist, sexist, and classist oppression to becoming agents of innovation, enfranchisement, and egalitarianism. As academics, Black feminists are in a unique position to fight for a pedagogical practice that is socially progressive so that the next generation of academics will, indeed, come from the very classroom population from which we have taught. A significant piece of my pedagogy as a Black feminist is finding and using those tools that will allow students to develop their voices within the classroom structure, as well as assist them in the process of becoming agents of their transformation into socially progressive intellectuals despite ongoing struggles with intersecting bias, such as gender identity, religion, race, class, and so forth.

In order to meet this challenge, I have spent the last year continuing to build and strengthen connections between my teaching practices, research, and university service in the development of a true feminist philosophy and praxis. Our students' diverse backgrounds and experiences serve as significant factors in the defining and development of a classroom space that attempts to convey basic principles of social justice and the development of selfhood – two basic principles of feminism. One must do more than acknowledge the specificity of location of class, race, and culture; one must also actively work to develop a praxis that suits the needs and experiences of those students whom one serves, as well as recognize the possibilities of learning from students to define the best way to shape such a praxis, and feminist thinking itself. I deliver my feminist teaching as a fluid praxis that is shaped, launched, and adjusted according to the audience, and what students themselves may bring to the classroom. I use technology as a strategy for the empowerment of those who are the most vulnerable to institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism. It involves recognizing that the classroom is a contested space, whether that space is physical or virtual. It is for this reason that I have worked towards developing a non-paternalistic intersectional feminist praxis that both embraces the innovations of the technological age while at the same time using that same technology to advance the enfranchisement of my students in the academic and District of Columbia community.

As a starting point, here is a reading list that has informed this approach:

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### **Virtual Bilingual Story Time and Cultural Mirrors – A. Vilageliu-Diaz**

University professors should become engaged with the community that surrounds them, especially in times of a global pandemic and racial unrest. Their roles and responsibilities include service not only to academia but to the spaces where they need them most. Our expertise in teaching writing and literature is best shared when we can uplift others, specifically, those whose voices have been historically pushed to the margins, ignored, silenced, and falsified. There are many ways community-engaged writing and teaching can occur; one of them is by collaborating with schools to support their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This is especially important in the middle of a pandemic when most children are learning from home through a computer screen, some of whom are isolated in their own homes. At the same time, most children who are negatively affected by these educational challenges and constraints are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

As an academic mother, I have been teaching from home while helping my prekindergartner son with virtual education and homework. We have both benefited from the challenges as my son has been auditing (and sometimes participating in) my UDC writing and literature classes while I have been attending preschool. What I've learned and what I knew before is that the elementary school curriculum is still very Eurocentric. Teaching materials feature mainstream experiences such as that of Thanksgiving, or mostly white children or animals as opposed to reflecting the diversity of the American experience. In fact, Mariana Souto-Manning argues that:

The definition of literacy we currently employ in US elementary schools, the materials we have, and the measures we use are predominantly informed by narrow conceptualizations of literacy. As such, they are likely to suppress our students' rights to read and write—and they are unlikely to mirror our students' experiences and practices. (5-6)

So even at a highly ranked bilingual and multicultural elementary school in Washington, DC, there is space for improvement. That is why I was asked to join the PTO Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at his school because the parents themselves emphasized that there was a demand and great need for more diversity. As a teacher and scholar with a background in Latinx and African American literature as well as writing and composition, I decided to serve my community and support the school's diversity efforts from a literacy perspective. The issues faced by this elementary school are not unique to them, as they are a problem in most US schools as well as universities. This year alone, many institutions of higher learning developed new diversity courses and issued Black Lives Matter statements. As a result, my contribution to virtual learning and diversity efforts became the creation of a Story Time weekly program that was unique in its approach in the Washington, DC, area. My project titled *Mi Libro, Mi Espejo* (My Book, My Mirror) became a bilingual literacy project that featured books written or illustrated by BIPOC. The goal is to provide cultural mirrors so that BIPOC children would see themselves reflected in the stories, words, and images. This could help to inspire the children and help them develop a love for books. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, books about white children, talking bears, trucks, monsters, potatoes, etc. represent nearly three-quarters (71%) of children's and young adult books published in 2019. At the same time, books by Blacks/Africans represent 11.9%. Books by First/Native Nations represent 1%, and books by Latinx represent 5.3% of the total books published in 2019. The lack of representation in a nation as diverse as the United States is confounding but not shocking. This is also reflected in the syllabi, anthologies, and even writing assignments administered in colleges and universities around the country. I now had a unique opportunity to gift these children an opportunity to see the world, literature, and literacy in a way that included their diverse stories, voices, and images.

The current pilot for *Mi Libro, Mi Espejo* hosts weekly online events for children in elementary school. These events create an experience that promotes healthy ideas of self, community, skin color, hair texture, language, and culture. Each event starts with a land acknowledgment and a child reading a book aloud (they choose what they want to read to the audience). We sometimes practice mindfulness with Dr. Michelle Chatman and we always end with a creative exercise by teaching artist, Claudia Diaz. The most important part of the event is the featured author who reads a book and interacts with the children. Even without a budget, I was honored to confirm the participation of 20 BIPOC children's book authors, some of which are award-winning writers. Overall, children are always celebrated as the protagonists in the diverse book selection. They are included as featured readers and are encouraged to discuss the books and ask questions.

After our first event, my son folded a sheet of paper into four and started creating a book. This is a boy who is only interested in drawing ninjas, but this time, he created a story where his family were the ninjas and superheroes and he gave each one of us a superpower. That evening, he created four books. I was happy and proud, and I hope that the children who join me each week are equally inspired to tell their own stories and to be the protagonists in their books.



## 4 Conclusion

As we have shown, four English faculty coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences meet at this intersection of crises to provide positive outcomes for our students, colleagues, and community. Our Read and Meet sessions will continue to model the use of technology to foster a sense of connectedness and safety for anyone who wants to share an hour or two with us to discuss these difficult topics of racism, classism, and the challenges of teaching in the current world.

We see this turn in teaching-designing rationale to be critical, open, and collaborative in seeking to create inclusive classroom practices through diverse course offerings. We are using active pedagogical tools to feel the pulse of our students while reaching them contextually where they are. This habit of teaching and collaborating not only challenges conventional modes of community engagement within the classroom, but it has the potential to understand student needs and work more actively towards student retention.

We believe that strong anti-racist and diverse course content can make Humanities teachers and students reach across the spectrum and make for newer emancipatory spaces where our representative stories can influence us to create hallmarks of excellence, equity, and sensitivity to each other. These practices are not only critically and contextually relevant, they help towards building stronger, empathetic communities that organize better because they are together. We are hopeful that once these crises have passed or at least come under control, we will emerge better and stronger.

## 5 Declarations

### 5.1 Competing Interests

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureau's membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

### 5.2 Publisher's Note

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