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Learning is an All-Black Thing: Literacy, Pedagogy, and Black Educational Institutions after *Brown v. Board of Education*

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the literacy practices cultivated in African American alternative educational institutions during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Using New Literacy Studies (NLS) as a methodological frame, I argue that African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s founded their own schools and fashioned their own curricula to challenge White supremacy in public education after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling. These schools valued the knowledge-making abilities of Black youth and encouraged Black students to use their literacy skills to improve their local communities. By exploring the educational and rhetorical values of the Mississippi Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Schools in East Palo Alto, California, I illustrate how these alternative educational institutions enforced culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies that highlighted the languages, histories, and identities of African American students. The students who attended these schools developed racial pride, self-reliance, and political consciousness, and were introduced to a tradition of social engagement and community organizing. I conclude this article by detailing how rhetoric and writing teachers might draw from the rhetorical work of the Freedom Schools and Nairobi Schools to address sociopolitical issues in the composition classroom.

> To be literate is to be honorable and intelligent. Tag some group illiterate, and you've gone beyond letters; you've judged their morals and their minds.
> —Mike Rose, "The Language of Exclusion"

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> To impact the education of our people, we needed to be connected to the community, speak the languages of that community, and mirror back to the people their possibilities when their world and previous schooling had not.
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> —Carmen Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections*

Introduction

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws enforcing separate public schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional. The case—*Brown v. Board of Education*—overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that normalized the rhetoric of "separate but equal" and allowed state-sponsored segregation in public schools. Because *Brown v. Board* made educational segregation illegal, many scholars suggest that the ruling initiated what is now remembered as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, since African Americans allegedly received legal access to the same educational opportunities, facilities, and resources as White Americans. However, responses to the *Brown* decision were not universal. Southern states passed over 450 laws to stall school desegregation efforts, and ninety percent of southern White people opposed the *Brown* mandate (Berrey 142; 187). Because most Black schools were underfunded and filled with underpaid staff, some African Americans aggressively advocated for school integration (128), while others protested the *Brown* judgment because they believed it would negatively affect the lives of African American educators and students (Holmes 80). Although some African Americans demanded access into White educational spaces and even integrated into predominantly White public schools and institutions of higher learning after 1954, others found it necessary to construct their own learning spaces (Epps-Robertson 2) and developed new alternative schools and educational institutions for Black students after *Brown v. Board*.[1]

In this article, I examine the range of these alternative schools and educational institutions, the multiple literacy practices associated with these spaces, and how these institutions implemented culturally relevant literacy practices that intersected with the

[1] In *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (2016), Russell Rickford notes how these schools hoped to "decolonize minds, nurture the next generation of activists, and to embody the principles of self-determination and African identity" (2). Catherine Prendergast's *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after* Brown v. Board of Education (2003) details the myriad ways Black educators were negatively impacted by *Brown v. Board*, including the dismissal of over 30,000 Black principals, administrators, and teachers over a span of eleven years. As part of her argument that access to literacy is a major civil rights and racial justice issue, Prendergast suggests that despite understandings of the *Brown* ruling as an indicator of American educational equality, literacy acquisition is often still viewed through a "Whites-only" lens.

needs and interests of local African American communities.[2] The African Americans responsible for the creation and maintenance of these institutions challenged traditional notions of knowledge production by using literacy practices ingrained in African American histories, language variations, and cultural and artistic expressions. These literacy practices provided Black students with knowledge not based solely on the acquisition of certain skills (like those found in predominantly White schools), but on principles that involved racial pride, self-reliance, social engagement, and political consciousness. Because of the belief that these principles could be lost once Black students assimilated into White schools, Black alternative educational institutions—often run by African American educators, community leaders, parents, and activists—offered Black students curricula that demonstrated an effective model for a participatory and rhetorical education.[3] By specifically examining the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the mid-1960s and the Nairobi Schools established in East Palo Alto, California, in 1966, I explain how the multiple literacy practices fostered in Black alternative educational spaces after *Brown* strengthened Black lives and communities by cultivating the knowledge(s) being suppressed in White-controlled schools. Furthermore, I illustrate how Black students were introduced to an organizing tradition in these spaces that merged educational concerns with political activism.[4] I conclude this article by briefly detailing how this history intersects with a vision that rhetoric and writing teachers might have for their own composition classrooms in our current sociopolitical moment.

African American Literacy Methodologies

Due to the educational difficulties and inequalities in predominantly White schools during the mid-1960s, many African Americans turned to their own communities to receive a satisfactory education.[5] This education, though, did not simply mimic the

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[2] Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32.3 (1995).

[3] According to Rickford, "The shuttering of beloved Black schools or the stripping of their cultural significance and identity through the loss of cherished traditions, emblems, colors, mascots, and names deepened the ordeal" for how school desegregation negatively impacted Black students (39).

[4] In the words of Prendergast, "The assumption of literacy as White property in crucial contexts has meant that a burden has been placed upon people of color to create and sustain alternative literacy institutions and programs" (9).

[5] When the *Brown* decision was made alongside the rhetoric of "with all deliberate speed," it was anticipated that the law would resolve the educational disparities experienced by Black students across the country. Instead, Black students faced difficulty in their pursuits to integrate White schools, especially institutions of higher learning in the South. For instance, it was not until 1961 and 1962 that

educational or literacy practices found in White schools. When Black students entered White schools, White educators, administrators, and Eurocentric curricula defined their educational journeys, successes, and failures. White-controlled school systems praised Black students for engaging with literacy practices that valued the histories, languages, and cultures of White America, and condemned Black students for retaining the histories, languages, and cultures of their home communities. Literacy scholars might consider this type of literacy engagement to be an example of an "autonomous" model of literacy, which means that upon acquisition, students are equipped with the tools needed to secure opportunities for professional success, social mobility, and economic freedom. However, several writing studies scholars have critiqued the idea that being literate only means retaining certain knowledge(s) that demonstrate universal proficiencies in reading and writing comprehension. Instead, these scholars support a New Literacy Studies (NLS) model, which acknowledges that literacy is "something that people do, rather than something that they have or do not have" and "represents social and cultural practices, rather than a set of skills to be acquired according to given hierarchies of understanding and social organization" (Kynard 32).[6]

Building on previous monographs that examine African American literacy and rhetorical practices (Moss 2003; Richardson 2003; Fisher 2009; Nunley 2011; Kynard 2013; Lathan 2015; Pritchard 2016; Gilyard and Banks 2018; ~~and~~ Epps-Robertson 2018), I explore the various ways that African Americans have engaged with language and vernacular forms to educate themselves in non-White learning spaces.[7] African Americans created educational institutions and maintained culturally responsive literacy practices to refute autonomous models of literacy and promote reading, writing, and speaking practices that connected to the linguistic resources and sociopolitical situations of African American students and their communities. Like other hush harbor spaces that "privilege African American knowledges, worldviews, and rhetorical forms, not just Black bodies" (Nunley 27), the Black educational institutions that I describe in this article cherished the identities and competencies of Black students. Instructors at these institutions reassured students that they were skilled and talented beings and did not chastise Black students for what they did not know. In these spaces, learning was more about knowledge *creation* than knowledge

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the University of Georgia and University of Mississippi admitted their first Black students, and the students on both campuses were welcomed with protests and hanging effigies. Many White institutions in the South continued to prevent Black enrollment until the mid-1970s (Kynard 50).

[6] For more on NLS, see Brian Street's *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education* (1995).

[7] In *On African American Rhetoric* (2018), Gilyard and Banks argue that Black composing practices in nontraditional school settings deserve more scholarly attention (122).

evaluation. The Black individuals governing the schools believed that the entire student body (and Black community as a whole) was capable of learning and entitled to an invigorating educational experience (as opposed to ideologies that framed education as a privilege for a select few). Since Black educational institutions rejected literacy practices that only presented White hegemonic mores, the Black students that enrolled in these institutions repossessed their educations by engaging with literacies that provided them with a sense of self-determination and empowerment.

The Mississippi Freedom Schools

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was an important U.S. Civil Rights organization that pushed for African American students to receive a rhetorical education. It also believed in the instruction of diverse literacy practices. In 1963, SNCC activist Charles Cobb proposed that the organization create the Freedom Schools, a network of alternative schools that used student-driven, community-centered, and culturally relevant literacies to educate African American students. Because public schools in Mississippi inadequately prepared African American youth to be critical thinkers and knowledge producers, Freedom Schools students were asked to "challenge the myths of [their] society, perceive more clearly its realities, find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for actions" (Carson, as qtd. in Schneider 49).[8]

Approximately forty schools were established in Black communities throughout the Magnolia State, coexisting alongside or influencing the direction of similar Black-run educational institutions, such as the Highlander Folk School, the Citizenship Schools, and the Child Development Group of Mississippi's (CDGM) Head Start program.[9] Responsible for educating over 3,000 Black students, the Freedom Schools relied partly on the labor of affluent, well-connected, and northern-born White college student volunteers. Many of them lacked teaching experience.[10]

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[8] In *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education* (2015), Paul Feigenbaum observes that students were told to "imagine alternative worlds" for themselves and the entire citizenry (5-6).

[9] For more on these institutions, see Katherine M. Charron's *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (2009); Rhea Estelle Lathan's *Freedom Writing: African American Civil Rights Literacy Activism, 1955-1967* (2015); and Crystal R. Sanders's *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle* (2016).

[10] The majority of Black SNCC activists opposed the decision to allow northern White college students to teach Freedom Schools classes, arguing that their presence would overlook the identities and voices of everyday Black people. On the other hand, some believed that including White Americans would guarantee justice and change because their presence, not their knowledge, would bring scrutiny to the state. Writing scholar Lindsey Ives explains: "The story of Freedom Summer

The curriculum consisted of strategies that encouraged students to be socially active in their local communities and focused on pedagogies that valued collaborative discussions and inquiry-based learning over rote learning and lecturing. Furthermore, literacy acquisition and student compositions purposely reflected a commitment to political engagement and action. For example, consider the following poem written by a Freedom Schools student about Hartman Turnbow, a Mississippi civil rights activist known for practicing self-defense (Freedom Schools participants often wrote poems about Black individuals that they admired in their community):

> *Turnbow*
> I know a man who has no foe
> His name is Mr. Turnbow
> He is about five feet six
> Every time you see him he has a gun or a brick
> If you want to keep your head
> Then you'd better not come tripping around his bed
> When he talks to you
> His fingers talk too
> Some people might not understand
> But Mr. Turnbow is a good old man.
> (Wesley, as qtd. in Umoja 104-105)

With its emphasis on accentuating the educational promise of African American communities and students, the curriculum of the Freedom Schools differed from the White-controlled public schools that Black students typically attended. Many public schools offered a racist curriculum that silenced students' voices and ignored their intellect. Academic materials and textbooks heavily relied on Black stereotypes and caricatures because White segregationists underfunded the educational budget and restricted what Black students learned. Freedom Schools students, however, wrote their own stories and produced their own textbooks to counter anti-Black narratives about them. Questions like "Why did Harriet Tubman go back into the South after she had gotten herself free in the North—and why so many times?" flooded the Freedom Schools curriculum and stressed the relationship between Black history, school instruction, and activism. In the words of SNCC activist Jane Stembridge, "Some [students were] cynical. Some [were] distrustful. All of them [had] a serious lack

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shows that acknowledging and leveraging White privilege is an effective move in the fight for racial justice in the U.S." (236).

of preparation both with regard to academic subjects and contemporary issues—but all of them [had] knowledge far beyond their years" (qtd. in Dittmer, Kolnick, McLemore 100). While some classes were held in churches or other community-based centers, others were organized in public parks and in the basements or backyards of private homes. In addition to learning traditional subjects like writing and mathematics, students enrolled in "elective" courses like art, dance, or a foreign language. All students took classes on the history and philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement and "Negro Studies." Freedom Schools teachers were expected to challenge racist beliefs about Black students before instructing them. They were also advised to learn from their students and stay keep up to date on the interests and needs of their students' families and communities.[11]

SNCC workers claimed that an educational system grounded in political and communal activism was central for African American liberation. While the autonomous model of literacy proposes that the acquisition of skills provides liberation, Freedom Schools teachers argued that liberation was experienced once literacy became *available* and *accessible* to everyone in the community. Furthermore, it was not enough for the voices, languages, and identities of people from marginalized groups to be heard and seen; they also had to be respected and included in the educational curriculum as valuable markers of knowledge.[12]

The Nairobi Schools

Following in the tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Schools, the Nairobi Schools of East Palo Alto, California, insisted that African American students engage with culturally responsive literacies that reflected the needs and interests of their communities. As a response to the inequities in the U.S. public educational system—

[11] This type of teacher-student relationship is billed as an important pedagogical strategy in Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005).

[12] According to Feigenbaum, "Achievement, in SNCC's perspective, was pursued explicitly as a means both to access literacy *and* to ensure that it yielded individual and community benefits in the face of systemic oppression. . . Values of hard work and self-reliance were thus promoted alongside values of mutualism and communal welfare" (79-80). Moreover, one of the most well-known classes of the Mississippi Freedom Schools was future Black Power advocate and SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael's "Speech Class," held at the Waveland Work-Study Institute in the spring of 1965. Carmichael's class interrogated the relationship between Standard American English (SAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and underscored how Black language and culture could be used to transform the conditions and meet the needs of local Black communities. Carmichael's goal—as well as the goal of the Freedom Schools in general—was to create an organic classroom that focused on political awareness and organized action (65). See Stephen Schneider's "Freedom Schooling: Stokely Carmichael and Critical Rhetorical Education" (2006).

even after *Brown v. Board*--many Black individuals decided to take matters into their own hands and formed Black independent schools based in African American communities. As I detail below, these Black independent schools valued literacies that were not being introduced to Black students in predominately White schools. Additionally, emphasis was not placed on mastery or competency of autonomous skills, but on the "development of new political views and values" (Hoover 202) and "a community oriented, culturally appropriate learning atmosphere" (Lewis 189).

In a community that was 88% Black with a 50% unemployment rate (Hoover 208), and just minutes from Palo Alto, the home of Stanford University, numerous residents of East Palo Alto felt that something needed to be done to create a better environment for the members of their community. Fully immersed in the mid-1960s rhetoric of the Black Power Movement, these community members adopted the beliefs most notably expressed by Black Nationalists like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, such as "gaining control over public institutions located in Black communities; reclaiming and revaluing Black people's African heritage; identifying with global anticolonial struggles; and throwing off the psychological shackles of self-hatred and internalized racism" (Biondi 269). After discovering that White classmates were calling her daughter a racial slur and her son had graduated from high school without learning how to read, Gertrude Wilks, a community activist in East Palo Alto, founded the Nairobi Schools in 1966 to provide Black children with a safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive educational space. Although initially conceived as a weekend program, the Nairobi Schools developed into a daily elementary school, high school, and junior college by 1969.

To establish the ethos of the schools, Wilks, with the assistance of other community members, boycotted the local public high school and encouraged students to not only boycott but also attend the Nairobi Schools (Hoover 203). Once operational, the schools depended on community volunteers to become the teachers (although a paid staff was institutionalized in subsequent years) and paralleled the student-centered ideologies of the Freedom Schools. In the words of Wilks: "The college students taught high school students, and the high school students taught the little ones in the park" (qtd. in Biondi 222). Because of this process, traditional conceptions of knowledge production shifted, since volunteers and students, and not just credentialed teachers or trained scholars, provided an education to others. According to Robert Hoover, the principal of the schools and founder of Nairobi College, the "curriculum was a collective effort" and the "students really r[a]n the school" (qtd. in Biondi 222-23).

Throughout the early 1970s, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines featured the Nairobi Schools to provide cogent profiles of Gertrude Wilks and her reasoning for forming the schools. In a July 30, 1970 article, Wilks was depicted as a "mid-40-year-old East Palo Alto, Calif., housewife who founded a Black private school and who describe[d] her curriculum focus as 'niggerology'" (*Jet* 45). According to Wilks, the goal of the curriculum was to "produce Black problem solvers and young Black community scholars who recognize[d] [their] slave condition and the necessity of breaking these chains on [their] minds" (*Jet* 45). Similarly, in an April 1, 1971 *Jet* article, "Public Schools 'Not Working;' Creates Own," Wilks explained that the Nairobi Schools were needed because White schools were not aware, nor interested in the needs, concerns, and problems of Black students and communities (*Jet* 47). In his explanation for why Nairobi College was needed, Don Smothers, a former president of the college, suggested that the other local colleges of the area were "not accessible to the community and not doing anything for the community" (*Jet* 47).

A few months later, *Ebony*'s September 1971 issue included an extensive write-up of the Nairobi Schools by Associate Editor Jack Slater. Entitled "Learning is an All-Black Thing: California Community Creates its Own School System," the write-up claimed that Wilks's faith and hard work resulted in the community-oriented schools for Black students (89). Slater reported that the Nairobi Schools created "an educational atmosphere which expunge[d] racial grief," and cited an instructor as stating that the schools taught Black students how to "find their identities, discover the potential of their minds and eventually invest that potential in [their] own community" (Slater 89). Another teacher articulated similar words: "We try to make a child believe in himself. We also explain to them, or demonstrate to them, that what they're doing now in school will someday yield some value to the community" (Slater 91). For Nairobi students, becoming literate was a communal activity; their educational successes benefited their local communities in tangible ways.

Although many of the teachers and tutors at the Nairobi Schools were not professionally trained as educators, they participated in preparation workshops before interacting with their Black students. During these workshops, teachers and tutors were told to challenge students and their thinking without patronizing them. According to Robert Hoover, the goal was not to "decide what a child's mental capacity [was], [but to] expand it," and teachers were expected to "teach, not diagnose" (qtd. in Hoover 204). Once teachers had a firm grasp of their roles as educators, they followed a curriculum that presented students with an understanding of how their individual identities were part of a beautiful and profound African lineage. According to Mary Eleanor Rhodes Hoover, a language specialist, director of the Nairobi Schools'

English Department, and wife of Robert Hoover, "The study of Black history and culture was an integral part of the Nairobi Day School's pedagogy [;] students and teachers at the school celebrated Black History and culture in the form of politically oriented music, rhymes, and short stories" (205). Rituals such as the singing of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (popularly referred to as the Black National Anthem) before classes started each morning and the recognition of holidays like Malcolm X's birthday on May 19 and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense on October 15 were institutionalized (Biondi 222). Notable Black community leaders and organizers such as the Black Panthers, Stokely Carmichael, and St. Clair Drake frequently visited Nairobi classes to discuss the benefits of having an "Afrocentric" educational curriculum that implemented diverse literacy practices often disregarded in predominately White schools.

For the younger students of the Nairobi Schools, activities with literacy regularly mirrored the literacy practices of the Freedom Schools and connected Black history with poetry, rhyming techniques, and syllable patterns. This approach strengthened students' reading skills and re/enforced racial and political pride. As seen with the following poems, students were not simply taught the literacy skills covered in predominantly White schools, such as how to spell or recognize rhyme schemes. At the Nairobi Schools, Black students engaged with literacy in ways that taught self-love and the importance of giving back to one's community:

Malcolm X
Malcolm X, Malcolm X,
Read so much he needed specs.
Malcolm X, Malcolm X,
Loved his people, loved the Blacks.
Taught us how to speak up loud,
Taught us how to stand up proud
(Hoover 205)

Harriet Tubman
Harriet Tubman
had a plan
to help Blacks get to
the promised land
(Hoover 206)

While these poems—and others like them—provided students with short historical anecdotes about renowned African American activists and leaders, they were methodically merged into participatory activities and discourses that consisted of group singing, storytelling, and call-and-response to create an energetic, collaborative, and enjoyable learning environment.

Even in writing-oriented classes for older students, emphasis was placed on familiarizing students with the rhetorical styles of Black writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Amiri Baraka (Lewis 190). In terms of the language variations that students used

in the classroom, the Nairobi Schools reflected an attitude that was identical to the one that Stokely Carmichael held in his Freedom Schools speech class. Although White schools enrolled Black English speakers in special education courses, writing classes at the Nairobi Schools used materials that "counteract[ed] negative stereotyping by showing that Black language [was] logical, intellectual, rich, and capable of expressing any kind of idea" (Lewis 190). Like how younger students learned spelling and poetry schemes by participating in collaborative group settings, older students also actively engaged in groups while writing. Students often read and analyzed rough and final drafts of papers aloud in class (this activity was called a "class performance"). Furthermore, students became the teachers of other students and altered traditional understandings of who was capable of channeling knowledge in the learning space. As Lewis articulates, "Learning through the group participational method [produced] a number of confident, good writers who [were] writing and encouraging others to write successfully in the schools, on the job, and on behalf of the local community" (195).[13]

As president of Nairobi College, Robert Hoover stated that "if [Nairobi] was going to meet the needs of people of color, [it would] have to educate leaders who want[ed] to work within the community—doctors, lawyers, engineers" (Miner 3). Nairobi College advocated for students to not leave their local communities but work to positively change them. The college mandated a demanding community service requirement that expected students to complete four hours of community service daily. In addition to aiding others, this requirement helped students learn important information about Black life that was excluded from mainstream textbooks and other scholarly documents. In the words of one female student, the communities that she served were "rich in knowledge and culture—but they [were] not researched. You [could not] read about them in White libraries" (Miner 10). Although community service was frequently completed in health centers, welfare offices, or with a Northern California prison, the Nairobi Schools introduced the Teen Project in 1967, which gave teenage students the opportunity to teach reading to preschoolers in the backyard of their homes (Hoover 207). The teaching strategies by the teenagers echoed those of the Freedom Schools and included culturally inspired academic activities, and the preschoolers formed relationships with promising teachers that came from their own communities. Although funding issues forced the Nairobi Schools to shut down in

[13] In December 2005, *College Composition and Communication* published an essay detailing the results of a five-year study on college writing at Stanford University. The authors of the essay argued that at the time of their research, "student writing [was] increasingly linked to theories and practices of performance" and "performance encourage[d] active participation and collaboration." See Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye's "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy."

1984 (the college closed in 1979), the schools never abandoned their commitment to providing a culturally relevant and community driven education to Black students of different ages and instruction levels. The schools understood the significance of combining literacy acquisition and effective pedagogy with social engagement.

Implications for Rhetoric and Composition Scholars

The Freedom Schools in Mississippi and Nairobi Schools in California challenged and redefined traditional notions of where and when academic knowledge is produced and shared. By investigating the individuals responsible for the creation and maintenance of these institutions and how they implemented multiple literacy practices ingrained in Black histories, languages, and cultures, I underscore how literacy engagement and knowledge acquisition for Black students in the 1960s and 1970s were not based solely on the attainment of skills but on principles of racial pride, political consciousness, and community activism.

Such African American literacy practices enable access to a meaningful education. A student's literacy journey is incomplete if it only includes the texts that a student reads for academic classes or the standardized fluency that a student reproduces in traditional school settings. On their way to becoming literate beings, today's students must also learn how to use their words to incite meaningful and ethical action and affirm their own identities and standings in the world (Fisher 86; 116). Additionally, the educational training that students receive should welcome their non-academic lives and languages in the classroom and not silence or push them aside for something that is deemed "better." The literacy practices that we teach and encourage students to use should have just as much power outside our classrooms as they do inside them. If we expect our students to become rhetorical agents who engage with literacy in multiple ways and for different purposes, then we must view the learning environment in a way that supports situational approaches to literacy use and proficiency.

Although 2019 marks the sixty-fifth anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, several public schools and communities across the country are now in a state of resegregation. Survey results from the U.S. Department of Education reveal that over the last decade, Black students are suspended from school or arrested on school property at disproportionately higher rates than White students, and many Black students do not have access to compassionate teachers, advanced courses, and funded resources like several of their White peers (Klein). While our public schools are currently struggling to maintain the ideals of equality that our country proclaims, this

does not have to be the reality of our composition classrooms. Like the educators of the Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Schools, writing instructors also have a responsibility to create multicultural classrooms that critically examine our societal ills and validate the backgrounds, experiences, and voices of all of our students (including Black students and students from other marginalized and underrepresented groups).[14] If the aim of composition studies is to produce "a more perfect, deeper democracy" (99), as Keith Gilyard (2008) suggests, then we must be steadfast in showing students that we welcome who they are and are committed to helping them develop rhetorical agency, savviness, and awareness inside and outside academia.

Composition pedagogy is never politically neutral. How we teach, where we teach, who we teach, and what we teach reflect particular worldviews that we value as educators, scholars, and citizens.[15] As we navigate our writing classes, let's remember how the Freedom Schools contested White supremacy and anti-Black rhetoric in public education, or how the Nairobi Schools trained students to become problem-solvers in their home communities. We possess the power to determine how social issues are handled in our classrooms and can encourage students to apply their literate selves in ways that are community-oriented and activist-driven. Given our present sociopolitical climate, I hope that we use our power to embrace and support the diverse identities and rhetorical agendas of our students, and build inclusive and just communities in our classrooms, institutions, and society at-large.

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[14] For more on multicultural classrooms, see Severino, Guerra, and Butler's *Writing in Multicultural Settings* (1997) and Daniel Barlow's "Composing Post-Multiculturalism" (2016).

[15] See John Rouse's "The Politics of Composition" (1979) and Kristie Fleckenstein's *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition* Classroom (2010) for examples of how the writing classroom is a political space.

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