
Liberal Humanism, Social Science, and the Discursive Legacy of the “Human” in English Education

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Introduction

As a field, English education is “riddled with complexities” (Gurl et. al., 2016, p. 66), its scope and purpose “perennially debated” (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008, p. 62). English education raises fundamental questions about the definitions of language and literacy, inspiring debates around the canonicity of the curriculum (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Skerrett, 2010) and the role of English as a colonial language of power in a multilingual world (de los Rios et. al., 2019). The discipline’s history has been framed as a series of ideological conflicts between “traditionalists” who value classical subject-based approaches to literature and rhetoric and “reformists” who value progressive, student-centered approaches (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008, p. 62).

However, this dominant narrative of dissension may obscure the deeper assumptions that undergird both traditionalist and reform approaches to English education. I am inspired here by the work of Michel Foucault, who encourages us to ask: “In what is given to us as universal, necessary, [and] obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary restraints?” (as cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 45). In the spirit of surfacing that which is

“given to us as universal, necessary, [and] obligatory,” this paper historicizes debates around English education in the United States in order to better understand the historical contingencies that have shaped English education.

I am interested in the knowledge systems--in Foucault’s phrase, systems of power/knowledge--that have structured English education across time. In particular, I suggest that the debate between so-called traditionalists and reformers in English education is one between those invested in two different systems of power/knowledge: *liberal humanism* and *social science*, both of which emerged from the same conditions of possibility, namely the violence of colonialism and enslavement (Lowe, 2015; Wynter, 2003). I begin my paper with a brief explanation of my methodology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and its particular relevance to my project. Next, I provide an overview of Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge with specific attention to liberal humanism and social science, drawing on Sylvia Wynter (2003) to highlight the role of colonialism and enslavement in producing these systems of thought. Then, I examine early instances of the debate between “traditionalists” and “reformers” in English education, beginning my study in the late 19th century when English formally secured its place in the secondary school curriculum. In doing so, I hope to open the possibility of rethinking the philosophies and practices that structure English education.

Methodology

My method is grounded in Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). Although Foucault is notorious for his refusal of methodological specificity, scholars from a range of disciplines have derived various analytical methods from his work, including genealogy, archaeology, and discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; Brass, 2013; Sonu, 2020; Tamboukou, 1999). As “a method of exposing the historical conditions through which... knowledge has played a part in shaping the conduct of individuals in Western societies” and “a method of understanding the contemporary practices through which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 110-111), Foucauldian discourse analysis is particularly well-suited to my project of linking present-day assumptions about English education to historically contingent philosophies and practices.

Foucauldian discourse analysis relies on a definition of “discourse” as the “rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge,” or disciplinary field (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 114). Discourse, then, is not merely language, but a whole range of techniques and practices, including “spatial arrangement, social practice, political discourse,

expert discourse, social interaction, and autobiographical accounts” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 115). Foucault’s (1975) work suggests the importance of reading these discourses across time, not to identify seamless historical trajectories but to locate epistemic shifts in thought and their affective shaping of experience. Therefore, a Foucauldian discourse analysis allows for the exploration of the disparate social and discursive practices that have historically structured the field of English education in the United States. By examining English education from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, as well as its present manifestations, I am able to trace the continuities and discontinuities in English education as it has been enacted across time.

Genealogies of the “Human” in Systems of Power/Knowledge

Defining Power/Knowledge

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014, p. 115). Power and knowledge are co-constituted; *power/knowledge* is the term for various discursive systems that produce what is possible for us to know, think, do, or be. Power/knowledge works through culture, institutions, and disciplines—what Foucault called technologies of power—to “control and produce certain subjectivities” by “normalizing mainstream perspectives as natural and pathologizing those outside the norm as deficient, lacking, or abnormal” (Caraballo, 2011, p. 167). These disciplinary systems work to make normal various practices of thought and behavior that play into the production of our individual subjectivities.

This paper draws on two systems of power/knowledge—liberal humanism and the social sciences—and their genealogies of the human in an attempt to understand their technologies of power in the particular realm of English education. Foucault himself critiqued both humanism and the social sciences, and others have built on his work or developed their own critiques, particularly expanding on his arguably underdeveloped ideas about race and colonialism (Da Silva, 2007; Weheliye, 2014). Before examining manifestations particular to English education, I explore liberal humanism and the social sciences in turn, focusing particularly on their “received genealogies of the human in the context of colonialism and enslavement” (Lowe, 2015, p. 175).

Genealogies of the Human in Western Thought

Foucault’s criticism of Enlightenment humanism relied on his argument that the Enlightenment leveraged one particular *kind* of humanism. He believed that

humanism was “a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies” across a range of systems of power/knowledge, including Marxism and Christianity (as cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 44). Humanism, in this sense, privileges the “human” as a particularly powerful, intelligent, or important life form and centers this life form in meaning-making. Foucault argued that humanism in general produced particular kinds of subjects, and that through the continued re-invention of our own autonomy (using what he called “technologies of the self”), we might resist its powerful grip. However, Foucault’s theory, though attentive to social practices within Europe, arguably “[treats] liberalism’s abstract promises of human freedom, rational progress, and social equality apart from the *global conditions* on which they depended” (Lowe, 2015, p. 2; emphasis added). In other words, Foucault’s conception of humanism neither engaged with non-European systems of thought nor reckoned with the extent to which Europe’s own development was connected to colonialism and enslavement abroad.

The Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter (2003), in contrast, directly confronts the ways in which Western thought emerged in the context of the global conditions of colonialism and enslavement. Early European thought “defined the human as primarily the religious subject of the Church” (Wynter, 2003, p. 265). This definition arose in the context of “the West’s transformation of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas/the Caribbean ... together with the population group of the enslaved peoples of Africa, transported across the Atlantic ... into the physical referents of its reinvention of medieval Europe’s Untrue Christian Other to its normative True Christian Self” (Wynter, 2003, p. 265). European Christian humanism was thus predicated on the existence of non-Christian non-humans and provided justification for European colonialism, genocide, and the accumulation of capital.

The ideal of the True Christian Self was replaced by that of the Rational Man (Wynter, 2003), concurrent with the rise of the physical sciences as a revolution in philosophical thinking and with global exploration that resulted in encounters with non-Christians (McKittrick, 2006). Wynter (2003) located the invention of “Rational Man” (also called Man1) during the Renaissance, when the conception of the secular, civic, self-possessed human being began to replace the previous Christian, theocentric humanism. She explains:

In the wake of the West’s reinvention of its True Christian Self in the transumed terms of the Rational Self of Man1, however, it was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes), that were made to reoccupy the

matrix slot of Otherness—to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other... (Wynter, 2003, p. 266)

Where previous formulations of humanism defined Man in contrast to those outside of Christianity, this emphasis on reason resulted in a redescription of “Others” as lacking the capacity to *reason*. Since “Man1” was no longer the subject of the Church, he became his *own* subject, a self-possession that was justified by the ability to reason. In this formulation, those who were colonized or enslaved were considered to be lacking the interiority--the rational capacities--that legitimized the self-possession on the part of so-called “free” men (Da Silva, 2007; Greeson, 2012; Lowe, 2015).

This discursive construction of deficiency was leveraged to justify “the conquest and dispossession, enslavement and eradication that constitute the course of liberalism¹ in its intimate partnership with capitalism” (Chuh, 2018, p. 3). Brenna Bhandar (2018) points out that “Locke’s favorite quadrumvirate ... illiterate people, savages, idiots, and children ... [were discursively produced as] lacking in the capacity for interior reflection and recollection.” Crucially, this group was also constructed as lacking the capacity to cultivate, and thus own, private property--including one’s own body and one’s own labor (Bhandar, 2018). The production of the self-possessive individual was thus entangled with “the case for exclusive individual property, beginning with the ‘property in each person,’ emerged in Europe in the 17th century as a result of the rise of the crisis of accumulation that led to capitalist market relations” (Kellogg, 2017, p. 88). This “naturalization of social hierarchies” through the uneven distribution of the capacity to reason, remember, and own, sorted “humans into different kinds based on their abilities to reason through aesthetic experience” (Chuh, 2018, p. 3).

However, Wynter suggests that Man1, the “political subject,” was eventually succeeded by *Man2*, a “bio-economic subject” (2003, p. 318). *Man2*’s invention involved

a redescription by means of which the still hybridly religio-secular political subject conception of the human, Man ... was redefined as optimally economic Man, at the same time as this Man was redefined by Darwin as a purely biological being whose origin, like that of all other species, was sited in Evolution, with the human therefore existing in a line of pure continuity with all other organic forms of life. (p. 314)

Man2 is a biological being whose capacity for reason denotes a scientifically *factual* superiority. Those who had been situated outside the bounds of rational civic and religious life during the era of *Man1* became

redefined as “uncivilized” or “savage” in contrast to the more highly evolved *Man2* during the era of *Man2*. *Man2* was “selected”; all others were “dysselected,” in Darwinian terms (Wynter, 2003). This era, as Wynter notes, set the stage for disciplines such as economics and biology, that is, the emergence of *social science* as a form of power/knowledge.

Foucault defined the social (or human) sciences, such as psychology and anthropology, as systems of power/knowledge built on a series of technologies of power. Invoking “humanitarian rhetoric on reform and progress,” early human scientists in the 19th century employed “increasingly efficient and diverse applications of these combined procedures of power and knowledge... to dominated groups... formed and given an identity through... dividing practices” (Rabinow, 1984, p. 8). Foucault was interested in this question: “How are the human sciences historically possible, and what are the historical conditions of their existence?” (Gordon, 1980, as cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 12). As Foucault argued, one of these historical conditions was the practice of medicine, which enacted categories of healthy and unhealthy and sane and insane human beings. Another was the practice of law, which enacted categories of deviant or criminal and normal human beings. These dividing and normalizing practices, originally designed for administrative purposes, also became the basis for health, sanity, and criminality as objects of study (Rabinow, 1984).

In the same way, non-Europeans were increasingly characterized as objects to be studied by *Man2*, the evolved subject. Here, Foucault arguably failed to fully account for how colonialism and enslavement, and the “Others” whom they produced and through whom they were legitimized, impacted the circulation of this system of power/knowledge. The creation of social science was predicated on the belief that race was a biological reality (Ladson-Billings, 2012). Drawing on Smedley (1993), Ladson-Billings (2012) suggests that the social sciences are embedded with certain historical assumptions, including the idea that humans belong to groups that are “discrete biotic entities,” that these groups could be ranked, and that “outer physical characteristics of human populations were surface manifestations of inner qualities such as intellect, morality, and temperament” (Ladson-Billings, 2012, p. 117). These racist belief systems manifested in “psychology’s notions of normal and exceptional individuals, sociology’s notions of normal and exceptional groups such as families and communities, as well as institutions, and anthropology’s notions of normal and exceptional cultures with implicit beliefs about the classification and ranking of cultural groups” (Ladson Billings, 2012, p. 117).

Wynter’s definitions of *Man1*, sanctified in his superiority by God, and *Man2*, enshrined as more evolved through the biological sciences, and the regimes

of truth produced by them, are especially relevant in an exploration of the debates that continue to haunt English education. I argue that English education in the United States was originally formulated during the 19th century with Man1 as the presumptive educated subject. English education was thus created with liberal humanist ideals of individual freedom and rationality at its core. Reformers, exemplified in this paper (and in many historical accounts) by John Dewey and the newly formed National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), meanwhile argued for schools that worked in the favor of a different presumptive subject--one that I will argue reflects Man2 and an over-reliance on the social sciences. In the next section, I explore these positions, looking at the “corpus of statements” in the early disciplinary formations of English (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017) that reveal specific investments in liberal humanism and the social sciences, both of which center “the hegemonic ‘human’ of modernity’: the bounded, Western, white, heteromale, able-bodied subject” (Singh, 2017, p. 101) whose existence is predicated on the dispossession and dehumanization of supposedly irrational or less evolved “Others.”

A History of English Education in the United States

The Committee of Ten and the Influence of Humanism

Sperling and DiPardo (2008) note that the dominant narrative of English education in secondary schools typically begins with the Committee of Ten. The Committee of Ten, established in 1892, was a group of university professors, led by Charles Eliot of Harvard, who coalesced in the interest of designing secondary school curriculum that would adequately prepare students for college (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008). Eliot’s leadership was key, as he was “a humanist in his general orientation” and a “champion of systematic development of reason” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 9). He believed that “the right selection of subjects... could develop citizens of all classes in accordance with the humanist ideal--with the power of reason, sensitivity to beauty, and high moral character” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 10). The Committee’s report underscores this belief, noting that “every *civilized* people must have a national system of education that aims at common results” (1894, p. 148, emphasis added).

The English subcommittee of the Committee of Ten prescribed “a high school course in English that would meet for 5 hours weekly for 4 years, emphasizing literary masterpieces and judicious training in correct expression” (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008, p. 64). The subcommittee determined that English instruction should organize its courseload as 60 percent literary

analysis, 30 percent composition, 5 percent rhetoric, and 5 percent grammar (Russell, 1991, p. 65). As the Committee put it, “The study of literature and training in the expression of thought, taken together, are the fundamental elements in any proper high-school course in English, demanding not only the largest share of time and attention, but continuous and concurrent treatment throughout the four years” (as cited in Lull & Wilson, 1921, p. 182). This emphasis on “correct expression” corresponds with the popularity of rhetoric throughout the 19th century (Johnson, 1993). Grounded in a then-popular theory that “the voice and the body are one with the mind and soul” (Johnson, 1993, p. 144), rhetoric instruction involved protecting the English language from contamination. One theorist worried about the “habits of inattention and inaccuracy... by which the English language is degraded from its native force and dignity of utterance, to a low and slovenly negligence of style....” (as cited in Johnson, 1993, p. 146). The language of degradation gestures toward a fear of contamination that suggests, beyond mere linguistic concerns, an investment in the maintenance of the hegemonically white, English-speaking Man.

The emphasis on written expression in English education can also be linked to humanistic ideals. Non-European literacies were often illegible to colonial invaders, who were unwilling or unable to recognize non-alphabetic communication systems (Lopez, 2013; Mignolo, 1992). Mazama (1998) notes that writing and rationality co-constituted one another in humanist discourse:

The Eurocentric discourse on writing... is part and parcel of the rationality argument. Writing, it is said, having some special effects on the brain, triggers and enhances rationality. Europeans are the most literate people, hence their higher cognitive power and precocious progress, whereas the rest of us, more or less stuck in our oral quagmire, stagnate. (p. 3)

Writing was associated with abstract thought, reason, memory, and the ability to participate in history--key elements of the rational subject, Man1.

A close relationship between secondary education and the university was a large part of the reason for English education’s explicitly humanistic approach (Smilie, 2012). The secondary English curriculum was “forced to adopt the perspective of the eastern colleges” (Russell, 2002, p. 65) and emphasize the analysis of canonical literature, even in composition, where writing became the primary vehicle through which to express this literary analysis.

Indeed, some university scholars, such as the Harvard professor Irving Babbitt, believed that the Committee’s ideological underpinnings were not humanistic *enough*. He critiqued their proposal for its insufficient attention to Greek and Roman classics,

which, he argued, were foundational tomes for inculcating morality and moderation in readers. Babbitt's viewpoint, though ultimately tempered by the Committee of Ten, was, in many ways, the logical conclusion of liberal humanist education. His emphasis on individual morality in the form of restraint aligned with humanist ideals of individual self-possession, as did Eliot's own emphasis "the power of reason, sensitivity to beauty, and high moral character" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 10).

English education, framed as it was by Eliot and the Committee of Ten as a means through which to read Eurocentric literary masterpieces and to practice "judicious training in correct expression" (Sperling & DiPaldo, 2008, p. 64) was thus indebted to the long legacy of liberal humanism that privileged European aesthetic production and reasoning--a system of power/knowledge that was produced in the context of legitimizing the extraction of land, resources, and labor from "lesser" humans.

The National Council of Teachers of English and the Influence of Social Science

However, the Committee's vision was not uncontested. For instance, the National Council of Teachers of English--whose history has been described as inseparable from "the history of American literacy education" (Christenbury, 2010, p. 3)--emerged in protest to the predominance of college entrance exams in defining secondary school curricula (Lindemann, 2011). Founded in 1911, NCTE positioned itself against disciplinary formulations of English that maintained fidelity to the university at the expense of broader preparation for life (Christenbury, 2010). In one of the early editions of NCTE's flagship *English Journal*, one writer celebrated the scientification of education and emphasized the importance of capitalizing on the "interests and needs" of students in order to "[develop] them into the type of men and women our civilization needs" (Breck, 1912, p. 66); however, "to our students 'interest' does not necessarily mean a liking for that which appeals to mature minds" (p. 70). There was thus an early recognition that young people were distinctly less mature than adults; however, they could be coaxed toward adulthood through developmentally appropriate activities. Breck encouraged teachers to adopt experimental methods, like scientists, trying out different approaches to teaching to determine which methods had the strongest effects on developing students.

This progressive bent gained traction as a corrective to the humanistic agenda of the Committee of Ten. In 1935, the NCTE published a guide called *An Experience Curriculum in English* advocating for "progressive, Dewey-centric curricular form" (Christenbury, 2010, p. 15) that included "literature, reading, creative

expression, communication, corrective teaching, and electives" (Farrar, 1937, p. 133). The authors "assert that the ideal curriculum consists of well-selected experiences," (Farrar, 1937, p. 134). Dewey's influence remained powerful for decades:

Beginning in 1945 through *English Journal*, NCTE promoted the use of the term language arts to characterize the education of younger students, an inclusive term intended to convey a more complex understanding of reading, writing, listening and speaking than 'English' as a traditional school subject had come to mean. (Christenbury, 2010, p. 15-16)

It is essential to understand Dewey, and his influence on NCTE, in the context of his progressive philosophy (Kliebard, 2004). Dewey's ideas were shaped by his influential interactions with developmental psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall (Kliebard, 2004). Baker (1999) argues that developmentalism has a long history in European thought, reaching at least as far back as the Enlightenment era; however, 19th-century "developmentalism can be understood as a variety of reforms that converged around a belief that the child did in fact develop through set stages that were scientifically verifiable" (Baker, 1999, p. 801). Developmentalism became imbued with the powerful legitimacy of science during this time, especially through its use in psychology (Baker, 1999). Ultimately, Hall's developmentalist approach to the curriculum eclipsed Harris's humanist approach in popularity, and Dewey's ideas were framed by the many of the same developmentalist ideas that structured Hall's thinking (Kliebard, 2004).

Hall was a careerist who was "early in recognizing that the applications of psychology to education would offer a most promising line of work" (Lagemann, 2002, p. 25). His greatest hope was to go down in history as "the Darwin of the mind" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 30). Hall became the leading advocate of what was known as child study, a psychological movement based on the idea that detailed, empirical observations of children were essential in order to designing curriculum and pedagogy that would meet their developmental needs (Kliebard, 2004). By the 1890s, child study was flourishing, and education had become inseparably entangled with the psychological sciences (Lageman, 2002). Child study advocates like Hall believed that "ever more accurate scientific data" on "different stages of child and adolescent development" was necessary for educational progress (Kliebard, 2004, p. 24).

Dewey's ideas synthesized Hall's emphasis on human development with progressive notions of social improvement (Kliebard, 2004). He argued that the "ideal school introduces and trains each child of society into membership" (Dewey, 2013, p. 44). Dewey relied on progress narratives that discursively conflated child

development and cultural development. He compared young children to “primitive peoples”:

There is a sort or natural recurrence of the child mind to the typical activities of primitive peoples; witness the hut which the boy likes to build in the yard, playing hunt, with bows, arrows, spears, and so on. Again the question comes: What are we to do with this interest--are we to ignore it, or just excite and draw it out? Or shall we get hold of it and direct it to something ahead, something better? (Dewey, 2013, p. 62)

Through education, these “primitive” interests “become a means of seeing the progress of the human race” (Dewey, 2013, p. 32). His idea of an individual’s development mirroring some sort of human progress echoed Hall’s earlier theory, which was founded on the notion that children and Indigenous or nomadic people are underdeveloped and deficient, while adults and Western industrial culture are the pinnacle of human achievement (Kliebard, 2004). However, as an early teacher at the Chicago Lab School noted, although “the fundamental interests of a child at this stage of growth and of a savage are the same... It could be said that the child is like the savage in ability but not in *capability*” (as cited in Fallace, 2010, p. 473). This is why Sonu and Benson (2016) call the (normatively white) child “quasi-human”--this child is discursively constructed as *not yet* human, rather than *outside of* humanity.

The white children at Dewey’s school were thus subject to “a softer version of white supremacy” as the arrangement of experiences at the school “communicated commonsense messages about racial and cultural hierarchies to white students in ways that were never intended to be about race at all” (Fallace, 2012, p. 512). It is important to note that Dewey’s relationship to culture was complex; at times, for instance, he questioned assimilationist ideas related to immigration (Dewey, 1902). Nevertheless, the fundamental principle on which his experiential education is based is a theory in which young people must be coaxed through stages of development using their concrete interests--interests that were constructed against the stereotyped cultural practices of “primitive peoples.”

Developmentalism, progressivism, and Dewey-ism all influenced the National Council of Teachers of English. Both Dewey and the NCTE approached language specifically from a developmentalist perspective. NCTE viewed speech and “language arts” as appropriate starting points for young learners based on their developmental stages (Christenbury, 2010). Dewey, meanwhile, noted that “The language instinct is the simplest form of the social expression of the child. Hence it is a great, perhaps the greatest of all educational resources” (2013, p. 59). He argued that language is

primarily a social instinct, originating in speech; its first goal is communication, before it can be a tool of *thought*. This emphasis on speech and language, rather than the written word, served to subtly reinforce, rather than disrupt, the Eurocentric conception of writing as emblematic of civilization. Because Dewey and other progressives viewed the child as quasi-human (Sonu & Benson, 2016), the use of spoken, rather than written, language with children reaffirms a hierarchy in which the young, uncivilized, and savage must use speech because they are not *able* to write.

Conclusion

I cannot argue, ultimately, that liberal humanism and social science were completely distinctive discourses, or that they did not interact with other systems of power/knowledge. For instance, in the same paper in which Breck (1912) lauds scientific approaches to education, drawing on social science discourse, she also speaks approvingly of the reasonable, moral subject, the kind of subject particularly privileged in liberal humanist discourse. Meanwhile, Brass (2013) suggests that the dominant narrative of NCTE history, which centers the humanist traditionalists and social science reformers cited in this paper, leaves out the important influence of religious discourse in early English education (discourse that Wynter would describe as endemic to Man1’s hybrid theological-scientific production).

Brass’s (2013) point aligns with long-standing criticisms that dominant histories of literacy and English in the United States have ignored literacy practices in non-dominant communities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gutiérrez et. al., 2017; Kirkland, 2013; Mohammed, 2020; Sealy-Ruiz, 2014). These renditions of history matter: our interpretations of the past can have material effects on our present and future conditions (Estes, 2019; Gilmore, 2018; McKittrick, 2013). Our understanding of what was possible in the past influences our efforts today and our conceptions of what might possible in the future. Simultaneous to parsing the discourses that constitute dominant narratives of English education, we must *also* reexamine history so that we can unearth clandestine literacy legacies that have produced and been produced by other discursive formations.

The Fugitive Literacies Collective (Lee, 2020), for instance, a group of literacy scholars of color, intentionally draws on the legacies of Black fugitive and abolitionist literacy practices to reconceptualize *literacy*. This “new generation of fugitive scholars” is “committed to resisting hegemonic academic norms and mores.... [and] highlighting literacies that break from educational practices that are inextricably rooted in anti-black, racist, and colonialist ideologies” (p. 180). Alternative histories like this one demonstrate the

persistence of literacy practices that privileged other ways of being human (Truman, 2019).

Regardless of whether we are engaging with dominant histories or surfacing under-explored legacies, researchers and practitioners can remain attuned to the specific discourses that may directly or indirectly inform their understandings and iterations of “English” as a discipline and “literacy” as a practice. How does the “human” and its violent conditions of possibility manifest in English education? We can attend to discourses of the rational, self-determined subject, recognizing that its existence is predicated on the irrational non-human. We can attend to discourses of the civilized, evolved subject, recognizing its existence is predicated on the uncivilized and dysselected subject. The presence of such humans and their implied shadow subjects allows us to think more deeply about how our scholarship and teaching might unwittingly serve discourses that legitimize violence and domination.

For instance, how might “critical literacies,” as important as they have been in recognizing and amplifying youth agency in “reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1983), reproduce humanist ideals about the fully rational, reflective, and self-determined subject who acts *in* the world, rather than being acted *on* in the world (Da Silva, 2007; Leander & Boldt, 2013)? We might consider more deeply how notions of empowerment implicit in many conceptions of critical literacy draw on notions of the hegemonic subject Man. Similarly, how might emphasis on the appropriateness of young adult novels (Glaus, 2014; Greathouse, 2017) subtly reinforce developmentalist narratives of children as quasi-human? Is there a way in which educators can endorse a range of textual options for young people without invoking their status as not yet fully human?

My purpose here is not to diminish these important and necessary projects. Instead, I am interested in how attentiveness to liberal humanist and social science discourses, their violent conditions of possibility and their outsized role in the history of English education, might inform our interpretations and revisions of our literacy theories and practices moving forward. Through careful scrutiny, we can begin to think--and rethink--these important discursive legacies and to imagine possibilities for producing “otherwise” forms of English education.

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¹I follow Kandice Chuh's (2018) definition of liberalism as “the notion that goodness, prosperity, and freedom follow from humanity's constitution by

discrete and self-conscious individuals in possession of the capacity to transcend subject experience by sheer will tethered to the faculty of reason” (p. 3).