In this Provocateur Piece, I challenge us to become critically aware of the ways that the space of schooling continues to be a “site of (Black) suffering” (Dumas, 2014) and to reflect on the fugitive orientations that are necessary for justice, for freedom, and for survival. I draw on the American slave narrative tradition to frame our understanding of what fugitive orientations might look like against a backdrop of enduring state-sanctioned violence, marginalization, and oppression endured by Black youth. I foreground this with a representation of my own fugitive literacy practices, which continue to shape my commitment to breaking free from dominant frames of literacy as prescribed by anti-Blackness and white supremacy and thus, marginalized by schools.

*Nappy*

When you comb your  
Baby girl’s kinks  
And coils  
Do so without  
Frustration or  
Complaint  
Or derisive  
Language about  
the task

*The term provocateur has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes’s welcome to the CEE 2015 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the “troublemaker” label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson’s, who was fittingly labeled “provocateur.” I can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section. TSJ*
Lyiscott > **Fugitive Literacies**

Otherwise
She will take it
In silence
It will nestle
Itself somewhere
Between
Her spirit and
Her self-esteem
It will be
One of her
First internal
lessons
That her natural
Beauty is
something to
Either be
Altered or
Destroyed

There are secret moments across Black homes in America that the world is not privy to. They are intimate moments. Moments where we (Black people) learn who we are in America from our mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, and our cousins an’ em. We learn powerful things, always. The nuanced cultural practices and traditions within Black communities are pervasive, dynamic, colorful, enduring, and profound. We are powerful and we know this. But we also, necessarily, learn survival. Survival is what we do. We learn to prepare our minds and bodies to be received by a white world that we must master to survive. We learn that the coarse and kinky coil of our hair must be translated into a language that predominantly white institutions will not be threatened or disgusted by. That before and in between Civil Rights era afros and present-day twist-outs Black hair in white spaces remains political. We remember the sizzling sting of the hot comb racing toward our scalps and the chemical stench of relaxers meant to straighten our coily hair into obedience.

**Violent**

Black bodies
Red streets
Black bodies
White police
Black bodies
Blue bruise
Black bodies
Red, white, and blue news
There are public moments across Black communities in America that the world drinks in deeply. They are spectacle moments. Moments where a narrative of Black disposability is reinscribed under the authorship of state-sanctioned violence and systemic racism. We remember Atatiana Jefferson. We remember Botham Jean. We remember Sandra Bland. We remember Eric Garner. We remember Rekia Boyd. We remember Tamir Rice. We remember Aiyana Stanley-Jones. We remember Freddie Gray. We remember Yvette Smith. We remember Michael Brown. We remember. We re-member. We will never forget.

**Broken**

My name was not always Diaspora
But one day a man crashed against my shores
Have you ever been cut so deep that your children had sores?
Well, this man whipped out his sword
Carved a name in my chest
Sliced through my mountains
Pierced through my valleys
Then told me that I looked broken and he could fix me

There is a diasporic history that frames our unrelenting quest for freedom. It is a history steeped in anti-Blackness and white supremacy. A history of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery all justified against a backdrop of white sanctity and Black barbarism. To be a diaspora is to be dispersed. Intentionally. Globally. Violently.

I began here with three poetic shifts that represent my own fugitive literacy practices. Ohito conceptualizes fugitive literacy practices as “tools with which to awaken and animate education as the practice of liberation from whiteness and anti-Blackness” (p. 186). In this spirit, the fugitive literacy practices that have become so central to my scholarship at once assert my experiential knowledge as a Black woman, and poetic form as a rhetorical tool for disrupting traditional notions of what knowledges and literacies are valued and validated in traditional educational contexts. I assert these to confront us with a glimpse into the intimate world of Blackness in relation to white supremacy, the public spectacle of Blackness in relation to white supremacy, and the dispersion of Black bodies as a result of white supremacy. This is a reflection of my praxis with historically marginalized youth as a Black woman scholar. Much like Gutiérrez (2008), “my work with youth from nondominant communities has necessarily emphasized the development of literacies in which everyday and institutional literacies are reframed into powerful literacies oriented toward critical social thought” (p. 149).
Enough has been done to uncover the ways that our education system remains complicit in this violence as schools continue to function in the service of the systemic social stratification and oppression of Black and Brown youth (Lyiscott, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Dumas (2014) contends that schooling is a site of Black suffering. In a piece about “Black fugitivity in enclosed places,” Sojoyner (2017) writes, “It is imperative, I contend, that we shift our framing from state-sponsored education as a redemptive structure of social progress to an understanding of education as one of the key sources of support for forms of structural oppression” (p. 517). Alongside this line of scholarship, Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) calls our attention to the climate of anti-Blackness and white supremacy that continues to shape Black existence in the afterlife of slavery. Additionally, *The Kalief Browder Story* (Furst, Carter, Weinstein, & Glasser, 2017), *13th* (DuVernay, Averick, & Barish, 2016), *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2010), and *Slavery by Another Name* (Blackmon, 2008) all represent efforts to expose the enduring state-sanctioned violence that marks Black life in America. Thus, the aesthetic and content of the poetic shifts above were born out of my social reality, which has necessitated physical, discursive, and cultural fugitivity both in and outside of school.

For educators committed to racial equity with an understanding of the enduring systemic violences that continue to threaten Black lives, sustaining fugitive literacy practices—where youth develop the tools to liberate themselves from whiteness and anti-Blackness—is crucial. It is with this imperative that the Fugitive Literacies Collective, which make up this special issue, was created. The Fugitive Literacies Collective was formed as a result of NCTE’s Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color 2016-18 cohort. This mentorship program was started by Carol Lee, Arnetha Ball, and Peter Smagorinsky in an effort to create a space for the development of early-career scholars and research-practitioners of color. During our cohort’s time building community and sharing scholarship, Carol Lee saw striking overlap in our epistemologies, research, and practice and encouraged us to forge a collective to amplify this necessary work. Taking this call to action to heart, members of the 2016–18 cohort spent months fleshing out the way that we wanted to theorize our work. Finally, with the guidance of several mentor scholars whom we called on to support our reflection, eight of us determined that the notions of fugitivity and critical literacies were powerful through-lines across our lived experiences, scholarship, and practice. It is within Cultivating New Voices, a space of refuge within the predominantly white institution of NCTE, that we were invited to question power, center our experiences, and challenge the status quo. This fugitive space marked
the birthplace of our collective, which seeks to sustain the ethos of fugitivity throughout our collective and individual scholarship.

In the racial equity work that I do alongside youth and educators across America, I am almost always confronted with the question of how. How long will it take for institutional practices and systems of power to be reshaped in ways that do no harm? How can those of us who are critically conscious survive spaces that require cultural erasure and dehumanization as central to “success”? How much can we possibly disrupt in the face of the very systems and ideologies that are woven into the tapestry of America? To these my answer is always, fugitivity. That is, finding refuge and agency in the critical literacies that forge a clear awareness of the systems of power, while actively pursuing freedom from these systems. And this, with the knowledge that freedom is never one complete, linear thing. Rather, the fugitive moves from refuge to refuge. From freedom to freedom. Building allies, shaping tools, and beating paths along the way.

Fugitivity

Among my most prized possessions is a popular T-shirt with lettering that reads, “I am my ancestors’ wildest dream.” I call for us to dream of fugitivity and freedom with the knowledge that we are the living ancestors of generations to come. This challenge necessitates boldness and risk. It calls us to break away from whiteness and anti-Blackness in ways that feel foreign to our traditional ways of knowing and being. It calls us to press toward visions of freedom from the tyranny of whiteness and anti-Blackness that we cannot yet see. It calls us to not just sit idly by as we benefit from those ancestors who risked their lives for freedom, but to participate in the tradition and blueprint of their survival. What kind of emotions did the thought of “freedom” stir up for the enslaved? At the sound of the word, did the hairs stand up on the back of their necks? When they heard whispers in the darkness about someone who successfully escaped the claws of “massa,” did their breath stop in their lungs? What visions of hope? What whispers of furtive liberty? Freedom.

The American slave narrative tradition serves as a rare window into the minds of enslaved Africans in the antebellum South. Particularly bold were the narratives that were written by the enslaved themselves, during a time when legislation made it illegal for them to read and write. Their writings painted vivid pictures of slavery, fugitivity, and personhood in a world that denied their full humanity. Importantly, any act of fugitivity involved a deep knowledge of the threat of pain and violence imposed by
chattel slavery alongside a vision of possibility, hope, and freedom beyond the known parameters of slavery. Barnor Hesse (2014) delineates how slave narratives served to expose the conditions of slavery and the escaping of those conditions:

The slave narrative was based on a structure of exposition as escape. This included escaping the prohibitions against speaking outside the racial law of slavery; escaping the societal repression of the slaves’ aspirations for positive liberty from the site of fugitivity; and escaping political retribution for portraying the constraints, indignities and violence inflicted in the individual life of the slave narrator as a communitarian experience. (p. 301)

Propelled by a complex combination of pain and this vision, the fugitive slave engaged in what Tina Campt refers to as “acts of flight” (2014). Campt argues that “the concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant.” In Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs (1862) embodies this tension. In her quest for fugitivity from the physical, material, and discursive chains of slavery, Jacobs painfully describes her acts of flight writing,

I had succeeded in cautiously conveying some messages to my relatives. They were harshly threatened, and despairing of my having a chance to escape, they advised me to return to my master, ask his forgiveness, and let him make an example of me. When I started upon this hazardous undertaking, I had resolved that, come what would, there should be no turning back. “Give me liberty, or give me death,” was my motto. (p. 151)

For educators committed to the work of racial equity, what acts of flight must take place to undermine the category of the dominant? If then, each act of flight was a desperate resolve to break free from a system of exploitation and hate, in pursuit of the true liberty of finally owning yourself, what now? What acts of flight—what texts, literacies, cultural practices—must be sustained in the classroom to break free from the pervasiveness of Anti-Blackness and white supremacy and move us toward the liberty of centering and owning marginalized ways of knowing that exist beyond the scope of normative schooling?

Dear Teacher,
Before you teach us to splinter our souls
For a seat at the table
Teach us to splinter our hands
As carpenters of our own justice
How dare you engorge us

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With this feast of feeble freedoms
While our appetites remain
An unquenched Black whole (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 1)

Note
1. A twist-out is a popular natural hairstyle within the Black community in which the hair is moisturized, twisted or braided overnight, and then loosed out in the morning for an afro-like hairstyle. That I feel the need to insert this note is telling. Too much of Black culture and everyday practices remains invisible to white educators who make up most teachers in America.

References
Jamila Lyiscott is a poet, community-engaged scholar, and an assistant professor of social justice education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her interdisciplinary research utilizes the intersections of language, race, and power as an analytic tool for exploring educational equity. Her scholarship and activism work together to center marginalized literacies and practices toward equity and justice. Jamila is a member of the Fugitive Literacies Collective, a community of eight critical-scholars who came together through the 2016–18 National Council of Teachers of English Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color cohort.