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LiCS MISSION STATEMENT

Literacy in Composition Studies is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords, because they do particular kinds of work. Composition points to the range of writing courses at the college level, including FYC, WAC/WID, writing studies, and professional writing, even as it signals the institutional, disciplinary, and historically problematic nature of the field. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted.

Given its ideological nature, literacy is a particularly fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. At its heart, literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. Orienting a Composition Studies journal around literacy prompts us to investigate the ways that writing is interpretive as well as persuasive; to analyze the connections and disconnections between writing and reading; and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on or constitutes the writer even as the writer seeks to act on or with others.

At this time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation, *LiCS* seeks submissions that theorize literacy at its intersection with composition and will prioritize work that bridges scholarship and concerns in both fields. We are especially interested in work that:

- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities
- analyzes the processes and power relations whereby literacies are valued or circulated
- adds new or challenges existing knowledge to literacy's history
- examines the literacies sponsored through college writing courses and curricula, including the range of literate activities, practices, and pedagogies that shape and inform, enable and constrain writing
- considers the implications of institutional, state, or national policies on literacy learning and teaching, including the articulation of high schools and higher education
- proposes or creates opportunities for new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies, especially those drawing on transnational, multilingual, and cross-cultural literacy research.

Editors' Introduction To Issue 11.2

This issue explores the interrelatedness and significance of context—including community literacy approaches, prison literacies, and basic writing courses—to the ideological pressures shaping literacy actors and their actions. These ideological pressures are further considered in our symposium piece that discusses how ChatGPT is easily prompted to reproduce racist language politics. Lastly, our book review in this issue considers Eli Goldblatt's long career through a series of conflicts and disciplinary overlaps.

In "A Heuristic for Critical Hope: Exploring Critical Awareness and Commitment to Action in Community Literacy," Rachael Shah critiques the preparation, teaching, and mentoring of community literacy practitioners in ways that are potentially and uncritically paternalistic, racist, and violent. Rather, Shah advocates for engaging with communities with more critical awareness. Through the lens of her graduate students' evolving experiences throughout a community literacy practicum, Shah offers the method of applying education scholars Kari Grain and Darren Lund's work to develop "critical hope" as a heuristic that more ethically engages with community literacy. The heuristic of critical hope and its visual mapping, according to Shah, provides a tangible model to community literacy workers in training to support reflexive approaches that are more responsible and self-aware.

In "Mothering Through Barbed Wire and Literacy Barriers," JWells examines the relationships among literacy, confinement, and motherhood, asking the following questions: How do motherhood and confinement both impose literacy normativity standards that can reinforce each other? How do incarcerated mothers' perceptions of literacy impact their identities as mothers? Through analysis of questionnaire data, JWells explores how autonomous models of literacy can promote both problematic hyper-individuation and decontextualization of literacies. Ultimately, JWells argues that incarcerated mothers use standards emerging from an autonomous model of literacy to meet "cultural intensive mothering standards," potentially as acts of resistance. The article ends with suggested pedagogical practices that can "address mothers' literacy needs without enforcing normalcy" (41), ultimately helping incarcerated individuals navigate and choose the literacies that can help them maintain those relationships most important to them.

In our final full-length article, "The Decolonial Imperative in Basic Writing," Walter Lucken IV shows how decolonial theories developed within Latinx writing and literacy studies provide teachers and researchers of Basic Writing with tools to counter deficit-based models of Basic Writing. Through a close analysis of early Basic Writing scholarship, Lucken contends "that colonial ideas of literacy frame the central research question of Basic Writing" (55) from the beginning, a problem literacy researchers more broadly must consider when countering standard-language ideology in and beyond the Basic Writing classroom. Decolonial theory further reveals, for Lucken, the "institutional geographies" that position Basic Writing and so-called basic writers at the margins of post-secondary education. Observing how studio pedagogies and other alternative approaches to Basic Writing "support Basic Writing in practice and critique it in theory" (63), Lucken concludes by examining how further work interrogating the field's histories and assumptions can begin resolving

this contradiction at the center of Basic Writing.

This issue also includes a symposium piece that taps into current conversations on Generative AI, hoping to extend them or invite further conversation about them. In “GenAI: The Impetus for Linguistic Justice Once and For All,” Faith Thompson and Lauren Hatch Pokhrel explore how generative AI tools like ChatGPT present an opportunity to challenge the traditional focus on standardized academic English in writing programs—a standard that often reflects white, middle-class language norms. Through an experiment using ChatGPT to generate a Black English text, they find that the GenAI tool produced stereotyped, biased responses that reflect white, middle-class language norms. This finding revealed to the authors how GenAI can reinforce dominant linguistic hierarchies and further marginalize multilingual and multidialectal students. To disrupt these hierarchies, Thompson and Pokhrel advocate an approach that reimagines academic conventions to more effectively incorporate students’ diverse voices and promote linguistic justice. They encourage educators to develop assignments that validate students’ language practices and stress that a justice-focused pedagogy can empower students to use their authentic voices. They view the literacy narrative genre as one possibility for fostering a more inclusive and humane approach to academic writing. The authors end by calling for continued research into GenAI’s antiracist applications.

Finally, this issue includes Elizabeth Kimball’s book review of Eli Goldblatt’s *Alone with Each Other: Literature and Literacy Intertwined*, a compilation of his publications between 1995 and 2022. Kimball reflects on the impact of Goldblatt’s expansive career across writing, organized into three sections: composition theory and pedagogy, community literacy, and poetics and practice. Kimball argues for the importance of this compilation as embodying “a tender embracing of the varying stances, and dare I say open conflicts, within composition itself” and as an artifact of “a history of the emergence and development of rhetoric and composition as a field” (102).

As we close out 2024, we want to express our deep gratitude for all of our authors, readers, and everyone involved in putting *LiCS* together. Thanks for all that you give this journal and our fields of literacy and writing studies. At the 2025 CCCC in Baltimore, MD, our journal will celebrate 12 years of publishing open-access scholarship. Be on the lookout to help us celebrate! Until then, be well, keep up the good fight, and we’ll see you in 2025.

—Kara Poe Alexander, Brenda Glascott, Al Harahap, Brian Hendickson,
Tara Lockhart, Juli Parrish, and Chris Warnick

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Teaching Dispositions: Cultivating Critical Hope in Community Literacy

Rachael Shah University of Nebraska Lincoln

KEYWORDS

graduate education; community-engaged pedagogy; community literacy; reflection

A HEURISTIC FOR CRITICAL HOPE: EXPLORING CRITICAL AWARENESS AND COMMITMENT TO ACTION IN COMMUNITY LITERACY

At the midpoint of my first community literacy graduate course, I had a difficult conversation with a student after class. She had entered the class brimming with enthusiasm, especially about the mini-internship component of the course that placed students at local literacy sites—in her case, leading creative writing workshops inside a youth detention facility. But, at this point, she felt utterly paralyzed by all the ethical complexities involved in community literacy, unsure if she should or could continue working at her site. Like many scholars in literacy studies and composition, I am wary of students entering literacy sites with naiveté or paternalism, so I take a critical lens when teaching community literacy. Yet during that conversation, I saw how the relentless stream of hard questions about ethics and power can drain students of their sense of purpose in pursuing the teaching of literacy, and critique can easily bleed into cynicism and withdrawal. How can we mentor others through the process of grappling with the critical aspects of community literacy, while still leaving openings for a hopeful commitment to doing the work?

Foundational texts in literacy studies often illuminate the limits of literacy, throwing a bright, unforgiving light on the ways that literacy is entangled in oppressive ideologies. In the classic work *The Violence of Literacy*, for example, J. Elspeth Stuckey reminds us that literacy practices that appear neutral can inflict deep harm, especially on marginalized communities. Eric Darnell Pritchard picks up this theme as he draws on Black queer literacy narratives to theorize “literacy normativity,” describing how literacy is used to “marginalize, ostracize, and condemn people for their identities and other ways of being” (31). Literacy education is often deeply shaped by trajectories of settler colonialism, racism,

heteronormativity, xenophobia, and other structures of marginalization (Baker-Bell; Patel; Wan). Not only does literacy have the potential to harm, but its benefits are not as simple as popular interpretations would have us believe; scholars have challenged the myth that literacy, by itself, has transformative impacts independent of its social context and use (Graff; Street). Passing a reading test or acquiring digital literacy does not grant immunity from the multifaceted forms of oppression that often shape people's lives. And in fact, as Kirk Branch reminds us, tying literacy education to hopes like economic advancement, citizenship, or critical thinking can cause further harm because it puts the focus on illiteracy rather than on the violent social disparities that structure our world. So, literacy scholars and practitioners are caught in a bind, as we have learned to distrust the hopes of literacy even as most of us engage in literacy education—and mentor others into this work.

Community engagement, like literacy, is also rife with ethical complexities and constraints. Linda Flower traces the problematic “logics” that often sustain university involvement in local communities, including the logic of “cultural mission,” a deficit-based view of communities that imposes white culture, and “technical expertise,” a hierarchical perspective that positions communities as passive recipients of university expertise. These university-centric logics can lead to real harm for communities engaged in partnerships with higher education, and Paula Mathieu details stories of unfulfilled commitments, useless projects, and paternalistic interactions. Vani Kannan, Ben Kuebrich, and Yanira Rodríguez explore how even community partnerships grounded in progressive rhetoric can have oppressive outcomes, and they argue that community engagement often primarily serves the corporate and militaristic goals of universities.

Ethical concerns like these must be explored by university representatives who will be entering community literacy sites, as the ability to see problems is the prerequisite for addressing them. As academics, we are well versed in the art of critique. But what we are perhaps less prepared for is the work of cultivating hope, commitment, and action. As Paul Feigenbaum notes in *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism Through Literacy Education*, an academic “perfect standard” of critical consciousness and literacy activism can lead to debilitation, as students and scholars may avoid attempts at making change because they cannot live up to this idealized standard.

This problem raises the question of how to support graduate students and novice teachers in developing the dispositions needed for community-engaged literacy work, especially as engaged graduate education continues to expand. In rhetoric and composition, “Community Literacy” is common in graduate curricula (Carlo and Enos), and several scholars have published discussions of graduate community literacy seminars, often co-authored with the students in these seminars (Bowen et al.; Fero et al.; Weinstein et al.).¹ Work has begun to trace the long-term impact of teaching community-based writing classes on graduate students (Druschke, Bolinder, Pittendrigh, and Rai) and map the competencies involved (Doberneck, Bargerstock, McNall, Egeren, and Zienek). Yet at the same time, several graduate students have published narratives of the complexities of retaining a commitment to hope and action in community literacy in the light of ableist, neoliberal, and hierarchical structures (Hizer; Hubrig, McWain, Meade, and Shah; McClantoc and Hubrig; McCool), and the body of scholarship built around how to equip graduate students for engaged work is relatively thin (Harris; O’Meara).

There are several rich heuristics that aim to push participants toward a more critical stance in community engagement, such as the “Critical Service Learning Reflection Tool,” developed out of Duke University (Stith, Anderson, Emmerling, Sikes, Clayton, Malone, and Bringle). This tool asks readers to rate their participation levels in specific critical practices, organized around five themes— “Authentic Relationships, Equitable Classrooms & Cognitive Justice, Reckoning with Systems, Social Change Skills, and Redistribution of Power” (5). For example, under “Redistribution of Power,” participants are asked to rate the level to which they build shared models of leadership in the community partnership that extend beyond organization leaders and include multiple marginalized perspectives. After rating each practice, participants are encouraged to focus on one area they rated as “somewhat” part of their practice to target for enhancement. Another example of a heuristic for fostering critical awareness, the HEADS UP model, was developed by Vanessa de Oliveria Andreotti, to be used especially in the context of global community engagement. This heuristic, through its acronym, invites participants to reflect on the complexities of “Hegemony,” “Ethnocentrism,” “Ahistoricism,” “Depoliticization,” “Self-congratulatory and Self-serving attitude,” “Uncomplicated Solutions,” and “Paternalism” (Andreotti 108). These guided reflection tools are powerful in leading readers to consider the various facets of criticality that can enable anti-oppressive action in community engagement.

I wonder, also, how heuristics might be more explicitly used to help graduate students navigate the interplay between these critical stances and hope. As Kari M. Grain and Daren E. Lund write in “The Social Justice Turn: Cultivating ‘Critical Hope’ in an Age of Despair,” the shift toward justice-oriented community engagement

is premised on, and can be aided by, the necessary tension between criticality—of privilege, charity, hegemony, representation, history, and inequality—along with a hope that is neither naïve nor idealistic, but that remains committed to ideals of justice, reflexivity, and solidarity. The criticality and hope that underlie the social justice turn in service-learning cannot be disaggregated but rather must work in tandem with one another at all times. (Grain and Lund 51)

Understanding the ways that criticality and hope work in tandem—and opposition—with each other is complex, and intentional support may help graduate students better recognize and respond to the push-pull of this tension in their own contexts.

This article, then, offers a heuristic that explicitly looks at the interaction between hope and criticality in community literacy, along with the factors that influence how a person might navigate the tension between them. The heuristic is intended to be used as a guided reflection tool that can support those who are involved in community literacy work—and especially who are mentoring others in this work—in better conceptualizing critical hope and maneuvering within critical hope dynamics.

The heuristic emerges from a study of my graduate community literacy seminar of 16 students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This class is generally taken by both masters and PhD students in English, including mostly full-time students focusing in Rhetoric and Composition, but also some literature and creative writing graduate students, local secondary teachers, and undergraduate

pre-service English teachers. The course introduces key scholarly conversations in literacy studies and community writing, in addition to placing students in “mini-internships” with local literacy organizations for two to four hours a week. These mini-internship sites are chosen in close consultation with me, given the student’s and the organization’s interests, capacity, availability, and prior relationship (when applicable). Sites range from youth slam poetry teams to English language classes for refugees, environmental literacy organizations, writing classes inside detention facilities, and more. Students regularly write reflections that connect the scholarly conversations of the class with their internship, and the first unit is devoted to the complexities of entering community literacy sites. The major seminar project is open-ended, and has included academic conference presentations, community-engaged class or research project designs, and/or deliverables for the partner organization.

With IRB approval, and with the support of a SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) program at my university, I studied the spring 2020 section of this graduate class.¹ I collected texts from the class that were relevant to critical hope, such as certain reading responses and collaborative google docs, and each month I invited students to participate in a short reflective freewrite, selecting words from a list to describe their disposition toward community literacy (e.g. wary, committed, excited) and freewriting about their choices. Near the end of the semester, I did a first round of coding for themes, and as I did so, I began trying to sketch out a figure that represented my developing understanding of critical hope based on student insights. I presented a draft of this figure, along with a presentation of emerging themes, to my students at the final class session for their use as a reflection tool and for their feedback, in the spirit of the community-based participatory research methodologies we had studied during the class that intentionally blur the lines between researcher and researched.² Students hosted their own peer-led interviews³ using this figure as a heuristic to reflect on their current disposition toward critical hope, and they shared their suggested revisions to the tool. I transcribed these interviews, loaded them into Dedoose qualitative research software alongside the existing data, and coded for themes again, informing the version of the reflection tool and discussion presented here.⁴

In this article, I introduce a heuristic for descriptively—not prescriptively—mapping orientations to “critical hope,” a sensibility that blends a commitment to act with an unflinching awareness of harmful dynamics enmeshed in community literacy. After theorizing the concept of critical hope, I offer an overview of the critical hope matrix, discussing its four main quadrants and troubling its categories with examples from student data. Next, I further draw on student insights to examine the section of the figure that encircles the quadrants: factors that influence movement across the matrix. The article concludes by offering concrete recommendations for community literacy courses, graduate mentoring, or professional development, exploring how the critical hope matrix can be used as a tool for classroom reflection or individual faculty practice, and raising questions to consider as our field learns to better support those who are entering the unwieldy and energizing work of community literacy.

THEORIZING CRITICAL HOPE

A deep understanding of hope for the purposes of literacy work requires moving beyond colloquial understandings of the term. Often, hope is positioned as *naïve*, a stance that requires turning a blind eye to negative evidence, and passive, a feeling that carries with it no expectation of concrete action. On the contrary, the conception of critical hope that frames this project requires an honest grappling with the trajectories of oppression that mark community literacy work and commitment to action in light of these challenges. In short, hope involves both *critical awareness* and *commitment to action*. In this section, I explore each of these components in turn.

“I am hopeful, but I am not naive” Cheryl Glenn says simply in *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope* (212), making the case for clear-eyed, critical awareness as part of a stance of hope. Indeed, she lays out a devastating overview of the bleakness of her current political moment in the first Trump presidency, and in the same breath, she calls for hope. For Glenn, hope is not incompatible with hard circumstances. Cornel West explains how hope arises not from ignoring but engaging difficult moments, theorizing his concept of “tragicomic hope”: a “hard-fought way of life” that calls for moving forward even in light of dehumanizing hate and oppression (19, 23). Keith Gilyard describes West’s tragicomic hope as an “indomitable, keep-on-pushing sensibility reflected in the high plateaus of African American music and its organic connection to the black freedom struggle” (78). Tragicomic hope, then, requires not blind optimism but a deep journey into the painful and oppressive structures that shape our world. West gives illustrations from civil rights activists to ground hope in “the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism” (24). Hope is not a synonym for rosy optimism—it involves deep, unsettling, and honest examination of pain.

Hope therefore requires *critical awareness*, an approach that seeks to identify, critique, and resist oppressive power dynamics, in the spirit of critical theory and critical pedagogy. As Max Horkheimer, one of the foundational critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, argues, critical theory “never aims simply at the increase of knowledge as such,” but rather aims at forwarding human “emancipation” (2456). This definition of “critical” is also present in theoretical families like Critical Race Theory (Bell; Delgado and Stefancic) and LATCrit (Delgado Bernal), as well as pedagogical approaches like critical pedagogy. As Peter McLaren writes, critical pedagogy “engages students in analyses of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools), and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality” (qtd. in George 92). The critical component of hope involves an unblinking look at the problematic dynamics and painful aspects of community literacy work, with the goal of identifying pathways for change.

Yet critical hope does not stop with reflecting on problems or discussing tools for change. As Paula Mathieu argues in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn of Composition*, hope “combines critical reflection with action” (18). Mathieu explains that hoping is fundamentally different than wishing, because hope requires taking on “risk and responsibility” (17). Wishing that someone might call or wishing that the rain might let up before it’s time to travel to campus requires no responsibility to

say or do anything to bring about the desired end. Yet Mathieu's understanding of hope, informed by Marxist utopian theorist Ernest Bloch, "is to look critically at one's present condition, assess what is missing, and then long for and work for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated" (19). In community literacy, hope requires acknowledging the problematic and insufficient nature of our work, but then acting out of this awareness. It requires moving forward in meaningful action.

Hope therefore involves a *commitment to action*. By action, I mean concrete steps in community literacy toward what Carmen Kynard calls *the work*. She describes *the work* as our deeper, justice-oriented calling, and differentiates *the work* from the *job*, the basic duties of our academic appointment, or the *hustle*, the professionalization moves, attuned to white norms, required to move ahead in the field. Kynard suggests that it is easy for academics in rhetoric and composition or literacy studies to confuse *the work*, *the job*, and *the hustle*, and she calls those of us pursuing community literacy to remain oriented to *doing the work*. Important here is her focus on *doing* in the phrase *doing the work*—the work requires a responsibility to act. Such a commitment to action therefore brushes up on questions about agency, a contested and complex term. Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona remind us that agency is not a stable sense of power that people can possess or lose. They argue that "agency is not an attribute of the individual but the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of actions" (133). As they explain, agency is rooted in *kairos*, or "social location in time and space," in and out of which people move as they experience opportunities to act. Agency is therefore constrained but still possible, as particular situations and structures create time-bound moments of potential action. In other words, a commitment to action is not a simple belief held or lost by an individual graduate student in a community literacy seminar—a sense of agency is enabled and constrained by the tangle of actors and structures that shape the classroom, the community literacy site, and the surrounding world. A critical awareness of the constrained nature of agency is important for moving beyond a naïve notion of community literacy, developing resilience in light of inevitable limitations, and reflecting in generative ways on the possibilities for *doing the work*. In short, the critical awareness and commitment to action components of hope work together, even as they present a tension.

The question of how to work in the tension between critical awareness and commitment to action is central to community literacy work for teachers and community participants. Patrick Berry offers a compelling story of how Juan, a member of a prison literacy class, holds this tension. During a cover letter writing exercise, Juan articulated an awareness that the structures surrounding the criminal justice system would limit his future employment opportunities, and that he and many of his peers would be "flipping burgers" regardless of the education in professional business writing they were receiving (Berry 24). In other words, Juan had a critical awareness of the limitations of literacy instruction. Yet he was also a dedicated participant in the writing class, saying, "Anybody who is able to obtain higher education while incarcerated will testify that it does something to you" (Berry 24). As Berry reflects, "[Juan's] complex understanding of what writing does and does not do demonstrates a hopeful and sometimes playful yet critical relationship with literacy that resists easy classification. Despite barriers and despite fear, he continued to write with the hope of making a difference in his own life and the world" (24). In short, Juan had critical hope. In some cases, graduate

community literacy programs can foster this same kind of critical hope that Juan embodies so richly.

At the same time, sometimes graduate literacy education does not—and should not—lead to a critically hopeful engagement in community literacy initiatives. In the next section, I will introduce a matrix for mapping critical hope, but before I do, I want to emphasize that the matrix is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, useful for understanding an orientation to critical hope in community literacy at a particular moment rather than an implicit argument there is a “correct” place on the matrix (one that most embodies a hopeful commitment to action and a critical stance) that students should be aspiring to. This descriptive framing of critical hope is important, because I want to explicitly trouble two assumptions. First, I am wary of the assumption that successful literacy programs necessarily realize our hopes (for citizenship, economic gain, liberatory personal expression, critical consciousness, and all the other expectations that weigh on literacy programming). As I touched on above, literacy scholars have long pointed out this is a deterministic myth (Graff) that can often serve to draw attention away from structural problems (Branch), and the actual program can do more harm than good (Pritchard). And second, I want to question the assumption that it is always our role to help graduate students and ourselves sustain that hope. Drawing on queercrip frameworks, Keshia McClantoc and Ada Hubrig highlight the dangerous nature of institutional expectations that can be placed on graduate students to perform community literacy work. Ada, for example, describes sobbing from shame in their hospital bed when they missed a community writing meeting for unhoused individuals due to a medical situation. Implicit pressures to achieve a “successful,” critically-aware community literacy partnership—pressures which often function decontextualized from graduate student factors like disability, economic precarity, mental health, and labor concerns—can create real harm. This is why the matrix that follows is designed to help individuals notice the dynamics and contextual factors that relate to their orientation to critical hope in community literacy, and provide space for reflection, rather than pressuring students to inhabit a particular quadrant. Often times, the dynamics that influence a graduate student’s orientation to critical hope in community literacy are experienced but not named or discussed in an academic setting, and one aim of this matrix is to provide space for these discussions.

CRITICAL HOPE MATRIX

The concept of critical hope that I theorize in this article can be portrayed as a figure, the critical hope matrix, to illuminate some of the ways that people interact with the concept. The critical hope matrix includes two axes that align with the two components of critical hope discussed in the previous section: the y-axis indicates *critical awareness*, and the x-axis signals *commitment to action* (see figure one). Intersecting these two axes creates four quadrants that represent some of the common orientations to critical hope, with different positions within each quadrant representing varying proximity to the axes. Here, I explain the matrix, drawing from student insights to illustrate each of the four quadrants.

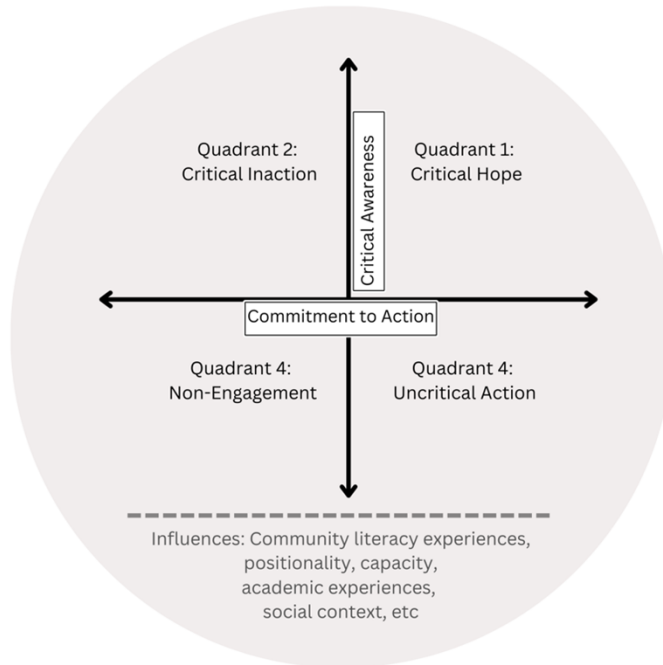


Fig. 1. Critical Hope Matrix

Quadrant one is characterized by both high commitment to action and high levels of critical awareness: this is the stance of critical hope. People with this orientation have a rich sense of the problems and insufficiencies of community literacy, but they are still invested in being involved in this work. They reflect deeply on the ethical complexities of their work, identify problematic dynamics as they arise, and continually revise to keep moving forward. One student succinctly expressed this stance at the end of the semester, writing, “Community Literacy and working with communities takes a lot of critical work and self-awareness. It’s difficult, but certainly work worth doing.” Well versed in critical theories of literacy, she identified a strong commitment to continue to work with a literacy initiative she was coordinating.

Quadrant two, with high critical awareness but low commitment to action, is characterized by critical inaction. People in this quadrant may be able to identify all the problematic aspects of community literacy work, but—for multiple possible reasons—do not attempt to engage in the work themselves. This quadrant may provide an armchair critic position from which to criticize the work of colleagues who are involved in community literacy and build a rationale for why academics in English studies should not participate in local literacy ecologies, especially for those in the upper left corner of the quadrant. In other cases, people in this quadrant may be closer to the y-axis: they may want to engage in action, but they are so overwhelmed by the potential ethical problems that they have trouble moving toward doing the work—this stance expresses itself as analysis paralysis.

Or, people may be hovering at the edge of crossing over the y-axis into action, as they may be new to a community or new to community literacy work, with enough critical awareness to know that it is important to listen and learn before attempting to participate in community literacy programs. They may also hold a rich critical awareness and interest in acting in the future, but be limited by barriers to agency, such as an unsupportive advisor or childcare responsibilities, that make it difficult to act. One student who sustained a particularly strong critical lens throughout the semester illustrated some of the potential dynamics of this quadrant. As she wrote in her first freewrite, “I’m critical of my own desires to see an impact that one semester will make for other people.” And later, she expressed hesitance to pursue community literacy work in the future, especially through community-based pedagogy, saying, “I am cautious that especially in [Name of City], I don’t have deep community connections and I am pretty aware that myself—and to project a little to [my] students—that we could do a little more harm than good.”

Non-engagement, with both low commitment to action and low critical awareness, is the defining stance of quadrant three. People in this category likely have little experience with community literacy work. They may have not have thought much about community literacy, perhaps because they have not been exposed, they are not interested, or they have other pressing concerns. Or, they may have been involved in the past but are not currently invested. The inaction stems less from concerns about the ethical challenges of literacy work, and more from lack of interest or attention. A wide variety of factors, from mental health challenges to lack of access to discussions of community literacy, to “publish or perish” pressures related to the academic job market, to pressing personal and professional interests elsewhere, can lead to a position within this quadrant. As one student explained, before the class, “I had done so little reading and so little thinking about community writing and community literacy besides just, ‘Well, I don’t know how to do that.’”

And finally, quadrant four combines high commitment to action with low critical awareness, producing uncritical action. Those operating out of this quadrant may have sincere investment and even substantive experience in community literacy work, often fueled by religious or civic commitments to the common good, but they may not yet be able to offer a robust articulation of the problematic power dynamics and limitations of community literacy. As one student wrote in an early freewrite, she had been involved in language and literacy work in communities, but she hadn’t yet theorized these projects as literacy work—they were “just jobs.” Another student, in a closing reflective interview, explained that she had begun the class with significant on-the-ground experience in community literacy through writing outreach programs in urban schools, but did not yet have a critical lens: “I had a couple of Spidey senses, but no real critical apparatus.” The uncritical action quadrant is bolstered by common cultural discourses that celebrate community volunteerism and frame literacy as a solution to poverty. For many who begin in this quadrant, a graduate community literacy seminar or engaged pedagogy professional development workshop may call for significant changes to their lenses on literacy work.

Taken together, the four quadrants of the critical hope matrix offer a map for tracing common orientations to community literacy work. It is important, however, to emphasize that this matrix is an obvious simplification of very complex dispositional characteristics, so these quadrants do

not represent clean categories—in practice, one’s orientation to this matrix is often moving and difficult to define, and the quadrants blur. One person’s experience of a particular quadrant may be markedly different from another person’s, as the contextual factors that shape orientation to community literacy—such as race, personality, and the specifics of the community literacy site—play a significant role. I also want to be careful here to stress again that this matrix is intended to be descriptive and reflective rather than evaluative, and I do not want to associate value judgements with locations on the matrix, with the exception of the “Uncritical Action” quadrant, given the potential for harm. In short, critical hope is *not* the “best” quadrant in many cases. Many valid and important reasons exist for identifying with the other quadrants. For example, a graduate student new to a city may appropriately acknowledge that they need to spend time learning about the context before committing to action, a lecturer may decide to step back from a community literacy initiative that is following problematic practices, an emerging scholar may focus their interests on making justice-oriented change in academic conversations rather than local department or community initiatives, a graduate student facing systemic challenges may need to put all energy toward surviving the academic environment, or a new parent may need to dedicate all available time on balancing childcare with academic responsibilities.

In addition, this matrix is designed to function not as a set framework, but as a sort of manipulative, like the objects given to young students to help them explore concepts such as density or fraction—something to play with, something that can be twisted, flipped, or broken apart as needed to foster understanding. I saw this kind of thoughtful manipulation of the model in one graduate student’s interview, when she invented her own blended quadrant while talking about a key learning moment in the class. Referencing Deborah Brandt’s definition of literacy sponsors as agents who enable or suppress literacy “and gain advantage by it in some way” (166), the student shared that she was familiar with literacy agents who did not have good intentions, but she hadn’t previously “thought so closely about the interests of ‘the good guys’” such as non-profits, “and how those could still shape the form that literacy work takes.” Relating this learning moment to the critical hope matrix, she shared that Brandt’s concept prompted her to want to “do more research and unpack the ghosts in the closets” at her internship non-profit—which she playfully identified as “armchair critic action.” By reimagining the armchair critic stance as an active one, rather than emblematic of the “critical inaction” quadrant where it was placed, the student demonstrates the malleability and inventive potential of the critical hope matrix.

With these nuances in mind, I turn next to a discussion of the circle that surrounds and permeates the four quadrants, a section of the figure that indicates the contextual factors that shape orientations to critical hope.

MOVING ACROSS THE MATRIX: FACTORS THAT SHAPE ORIENTATIONS TO CRITICAL HOPE

The circle surrounding the quadrants in the critical hope matrix, explicitly dedicated to contextual factors, is intended to help others identify and reflect on the influences that shape their

own pathway through critical hope dynamics. Data from student reflections and interviews reveal the complexity of these pathways. When designing the study, I anticipated that a rough majority of students might follow a common “plot” in their orientations toward critical hope, perhaps starting in the non-engaged or naïve action quadrant, veering into the critical inaction quadrant (an armchair critic or analysis paralysis stance) as we discussed critical readings on literacy and the honeymoon period at the internship site ended, and then rounding out into critical hope as they learned strategies for moving forward in spite of challenges. My visual map for the anticipated vision of their path was similar to the “Common Ups and Downs of the Decolonizing Journey” figure presented by Sharon Stein et al.,ⁱⁱ which begins with “excitement,” and a line that suddenly spikes upward, along with the words “promises of safe, straight-forward, easy solutions,” aligning with the naïve action quadrant (8). Then, Stein et al.’s line takes a steep turn down, with descriptors “overwhelmed and immobilized due to disappointment, depression, disillusionment, frustration, sense of hopelessness” matching the critical inaction quadrant (8). Then, the line climbs up partially again, followed by small dips up and down to communicate a continued pattern forward, alongside words that include “stamina,” “discernment,” and “comfort with uncertainty,” matching what I view as critical hope (8). I carefully incorporated readings, activities, and assignments into the class that I hoped would support this common journey.

However, the data revealed that students began and ended all over the matrix, and they moved in different directions; while some did follow my anticipated path, many did not. Figure two below maps the trajectories of the students who completed all of the major reflective checkpoint assignments, demonstrating the individualized nature of critical hope pathways.

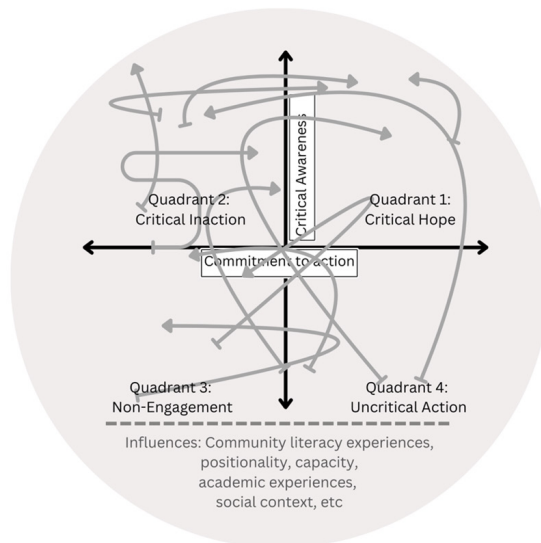


Fig. 2. Student Trajectories on Critical Hope Matrix

When asked about the factors that impacted critical hope trajectories, students sometimes

referenced pedagogical choices, but often they discussed external influences. In particular, data collection for this study occurred during the spring of 2020, when the pandemic first upended normal daily life and shut down face-to-face internships at community literacy sites, and COVID-19 ramifications played a significant impact in students' developing understandings of critical hope. At first glance, it may seem that data collected during the pandemic would not be useful in understanding dynamics in more typical moments of critical hope dynamics. However, the discussion in one of the peer-led interviews shed light on how the pandemic actually served to clarify common dynamics. The students were discussing possible changes to the matrix to better account for the fact that they wanted to act at their community literacy sites but were unable to because of the pandemic shutdown. One student suggested a new matrix space to indicate "limbo" or "pause," but the other student argued that this change might be "covid-specific," wondering how often that space would be used outside of the current circumstances. In response, the first student referenced a peer's internship, in which planned activities to launch a zine and a youth advocacy writing workshop were stopped due to a series of institutional roadblocks. She continued, "Covid took away agency from a lot of people at once. And institutional forces take away agency from a lot of people all at once, too." In short, COVID set in sharp relief dynamics that are always present, though sometimes concealed: critical hope is not a matter of internal enlightenment, but rather it is deeply shaped by external forces. One student illustrated this when discussing her critical hope trajectory, describing how she was "pushed" into a different quadrant. As this study demonstrates, the development of critical hope occurs in a complex web of interacting environmental factors, and perhaps the most important mentorship strategy is therefore to support novice community literacy educators in understanding and responding to their own ecologies. In what follows, I explore some of the influences highlighted by my students in their reflections. The bottom of the critical hope matrix explicitly acknowledges these influences, as the grey circle symbolizes the way these influences permeate how critical hope is experienced, with the goal of encouraging others to name and reflect on the influences that are acting on them.

The influences that students referenced most frequently when discussing their orientations to critical hope was their community literacy internship—their on-the-ground community literacy experiences. All students were placed at community literacy sites that matched their interests, with weekly participation at the site. Students often described their critical hope position in terms of what was occurring at their internship site, from the challenges of working with a resistant older participant in a language class to the invitation to join a community member's family for dinner, underlining that critical hope is most fully explored not through readings or discussions, but through experiential learning. Yet, as many in community writing have identified, the power of engaged pedagogy occurs alongside its unpredictability—community literacy is a stochastic art, like medicine, as outcomes are uncertain even when best practices are followed (Clifton). An instructor or mentor may guide students to particular organizations or recommend certain approaches, but ultimately, each community literacy partnership experience will unfold in its own unforeseeable way. As one student reflected, "A search for critical hope is such a personal thing. It's largely dependent on how a person's internship goes, and both the student and the teacher of this class have very little control over that student's experience with their internship."

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined both the power and the unpredictable nature of experiential learning in community literacy. When the pandemic hit unexpectedly, the class internships were stopped entirely or dramatically altered to operate virtually, and many students' critical hope trajectories took a sudden turn. For example, one student who was previously operating in the critical hope quadrant was "ghosted" by her site when trying to move her internship online, a response she fully understood, but it still felt "disappointing" and led her to be "disengaged." She was one of several who followed a similar turn toward non-engagement (quadrant three) as planned literacy activities were sidelined and attention understandably shifted elsewhere. Yet another student was inspired by how she saw her site creatively adapting to respond to COVID, which led to a deeper sense of critical hope (quadrant one) as she wanted to be involved in their efforts. A different student identified the pandemic as pulling him out of analysis paralysis (from quadrant two toward quadrant one), as it limited his options for future pedagogical partnerships into a manageable list. The pandemic upended the critical hope trajectories of many students, as their understanding of community literacy was so enmeshed with the experiential learning at their site.

Even outside of dramatic shifts due to COVID, however, the internship sites had a powerful influence on students' critical hope, a finding that aligns with Lauren Marshall Bowen and her graduate students' discussion of the broad impact of direct community engagement experience in a graduate community literacy seminar. Particularly important to critical hope development was the extent to which the organization modeled critical hope. One student wrote about being energized by the ways she saw her site resist problematic power dynamics in community literacy, as her organization used strategies such as allowing the youth participants to lead. Working at a different site, another student wrote, "The organization I worked with has an important goal, but their engagement tactics were difficult for me, because they were doing a lot of the things we learned to be critical of in this class," such as imposing programming without local collaboration or input. Working with an organization that does not share a critical lens on troublesome dynamics in community literacy can offer an opportunity to develop strategies for pursuing critical hope within restrictive institutions, but this situation does make moving toward quadrant one, critical hope, much more difficult. In short, students encountered a wide variety of internship circumstances, and their reflections indicate that a student's personal experiences with community literacy play a key role in the ecological web that impacts the development of critical hope.

A second factor in critical hope development—interacting with all the others—is student positionality. COVID-19 highlighted vast disparities in how students experience community literacy work and graduate school more broadly, as students contended with challenges such as sudden family caretaking responsibilities, lack of internet connection in a rural living situation that necessitated doing remote work in a library parking lot, and mental illness severely exacerbated by the pandemic. These factors, linked to identity markers such as gender, class, and dis/ability status, strongly shaped how students approached critical hope during the pandemic. For example, one student wrote, "As someone who deals with multiple mental health issues in normal times, the pandemic has really done a number on me. It's hard to maintain that agency aspect when I see 26 million people losing their jobs, worrying about homelessness, starvation, so many deaths." The pandemic made the impact of

student positionality more obvious, because it intensified differences, and it led students to reveal positionality markers more publicly while negotiating emergency accommodations and support.

Yet identity factors were inflecting the dynamics of critical hope throughout the semester. For example, one student identified herself as positioned in the critical hope quadrant and shared, “I don’t really consider myself a person of naïve action, because as someone who’s had people try to ‘save’ me, as a poor rural white person who was constantly told I was too illiterate, I don’t think I’ve ever had that approach to community literacy.” This student’s raced and classed background offered its own lens, built through personal experience, that granted insight into the complex nature of literacy engagement and positioned this student on the higher end of the criticality axis. In different ways, orientation to the “commitment to action” axis was also influenced by identity factors. At the beginning of the semester, one student wrote, “I’m apprehensive because I tend to be an introverted, bookish, homebody and getting out to meet new people and go to new places when I don’t feel super-prepared or knowledgeable is very stressful and draining for me.” The action component of critical hope was daunting to this student because of the new relationships required. Similarly, a peer reflected in her closing freewrite, “The armchair critic space [quadrant two] is easier for me to dwell in, because as an introvert it’s very difficult for me to make the necessary normal human connections for community work, even though I can apply that critical lens. I have moved closer to the critical hope space, and definitely aspire to be there, but with my social anxiety, I know I have a lot of work to do to fulfill that agency.” As these two statements illuminate, a high position on the “commitment to action” axis demands much more from some students because of identity factors. Student identity predisposed students to begin their semester in various places on the critical hope matrix, and these identity factors exerted different gravitational pulls as students moved across the matrix.

Positionality interacts intensively with the other factors, such as experience through a literacy internship, that influence critical hope. For example, one student selected the word “cautious” to describe her orientation to community literacy, explaining that both she and her co-teacher at her internship site were “white, 20-somethings, and American citizens,” while most of the students in the class were people of color who did not speak English as a native language. She had enough of a critical lens to recognize the complicated nature of interacting across difference in literacy settings, like English language classes, that have historically functioned as sites of assimilation and white saviorism, leading to hesitation about what a commitment to action might ethically look like in this space. Conversely, another student discussed how the opportunity to return to a site where she had once been a literacy learner herself deepened her investment. Graduate students’ positionality relative to community members at their literacy site shaped their thinking about critical hope, one of many ways that identity influenced their dispositions. Similarly, Michael Blancato, Gavin P. Johnson, Beverly J. Moss, and Sara Wilder found in their study of community-engaged teachers, including several graduate student teachers, that the positionality of instructors played a pivotal role in shaping approaches to teaching a community literacy class, as it impacted the ways that teachers connected with community sites. In particular, they highlighted the role of race, institutional status, creative interests, and community relationships in impacting course design. These authors argue that those who teach or mentor others to teach engaged writing classes should consider instructor positionality

as a central and urgent topic of reflection, as it so powerfully influences ways of imagining community literacy work—a call that my study echoes, as well.

Also strongly shaped by positionality, capacity emerged as another factor that students identified when explaining their critical hope trajectories. Students wrote about their capacity—in terms of time, energy, emotional labor, and other resources—to take up the work of critical hope. Capacity concerns were foregrounded by COVID-19, as the pandemic often limited the bandwidth students had for community work. In a final interview conversation, one student discussed how reckoning with the pandemic had sapped much of her energy. She reflected, “I’m personally tired. It’s not that I’m not hopeful. It’s not that I don’t want to be critical. It’s my brain hurts when I think about it [the pandemic.]” Her peer interviewer responded, “I think that you have critical hope fatigue.” In a similar vein, another student wrote, “While it would seem that many people have more time to dedicate to projects [because of the shutdown], even those of us with fewer adjustments (like what to do with kids, ailing family members, etc.) might be struggling finding the mental space to take on new projects, let alone finish old ones.” Several students also wrote about the emotional toll of worrying about community members at their literacy sites who were facing the pandemic from positions made precarious by racism, poverty, and language barriers. As COVID brought to light, capacity for community literacy work involves not just time, but emotional energy. A third student explained in her interview, “Especially with covid, I’m trying to be really careful about how I give my time out and trying to make sure that when I do it, it’s in really meaningful ways. But I do also feel like I’ve got some connections with communities here where I can do meaningful work.” The COVID-19 pandemic made time and emotional energy even more precious resources for many, leading to important reflections about what role community literacy might have in students’ lives, and what kind of “commitment to action” might be feasible.

Capacity concerns also appeared when students discussed critical hope throughout the semester, beyond the COVID shutdown. Some, for example, linked hesitance toward community literacy work with limited time, given the other coursework and teaching responsibilities they held. One student expressed she may not continue to work with community literacy beyond the class, partly because her “grad school life” was so busy: “Even saying, ‘oh, it’s only a few hours a week,’ that is something, you know. That is something.” Another student, studying to be a high school English teacher, described how she previously was non-engaged with community literacy, sitting in quadrant three, but her critical hope trajectory shifted because she came to a new understanding of her capacity: “Before this class, I never really thought about doing community literacy. I thought I didn’t have ‘time’. This class and my mini-internship have shown me how my major/career fits so well into different aspects of community literacy.” Working at a community literacy site that was housed in a secondary school, this student realized that she had the ability and interest to fit community literacy in her future teaching career, drawing on the same skills and places that would already be part of her life. In assessing their capacity to include community literacy work into their lives, students also considered emotional energy as a factor. As one student reflected, “There’s a lot of emotional labor that goes into working with other people in any capacity, but I think maybe when we’ve got such a lofty goal of ‘making a difference,’ it heightens those emotions (at least for me) because those stakes

feel higher.” Community literacy work demands much for those who engage it, and the shifting capacities of individuals—shaped by positionality—play a significant role in enabling or constricting critical hope.

This leads to another important category of influences—academic experiences, such as the readings, class activities, and design of community literacy graduate classes. Readings that support a critical vision often shifted students higher along the “critical awareness” axes, for example. Another aspect of the class that several students commented on was the models of how others have worked through the messy, situated dynamics of critical hope. Some of our class readings featured scholars who told personal stories about their struggle with critical hope (e.g. Feigenbaum). One student wrote that it was encouraging for her to see scholars who explicitly wrestled with these critical tensions while still moving forward in their own community literacy work, saying, “Here are some big names who ask similar questions that I do.” Guest speakers served a similar role. When asked to identify aspects of the course that impacted critical hope trajectories, students referenced guest teaching by an alumna of the course who had gone on to direct her own prison writing program. The original plan for the class included a visit to the prison to watch a poetry slam inside, followed by dinner and reflection with the program director, but when this event was canceled due to COVID, I hosted the program director for an informal conversation via zoom about the dynamics of literacy work. The discussion—sometimes quite raw—ranged from how to wrestle with the ethical ambiguities of prison writing programs to managing emotional labor (complicated by the speaker’s female positionality in the context of a men’s prison), to strategies for partnering with constrictive institutions, to what ultimately motivated the program director to continue this work. Several students pointed to this conversation as an important moment in the class, as they watched someone who had been a fellow graduate student just a few years before now living out the dynamics of critical vision and commitment to action in a fulltime position. Critical hope journeys are different for everyone, but hearing others tell their stories can help people reflect on their own—and demonstrate that the process of engaging critical hope is always messy and unfinished.

In short, this study revealed that orientations to critical vision and commitment to action are shaped by a complex web of factors that are individualized, unstable, and deeply grounded in personal experiences and intersectional positionalities. Critical hope is therefore not a simple matter of individual will, and the activities or readings selected by an instructor are only one piece of the puzzle. What is perhaps most important, then, is creating space for people to reflect on their own critical hope ecologies.

SUPPORTING CRITICAL HOPE REFLECTION

Dwelling in the tension between critical vision and commitment to action is no easy task, yet engaging deeply with these often-competing forces is vital to the work of community literacy. Graduate students and others entering community literacy pedagogy or scholarship deserve support as they work through this process. Ultimately, in this article, I argue for the importance of allowing individualized and supportive opportunities for people to reflect on their own development of critical

hope. So little related to critical hope is in the instructor's hands, but—as evidenced by the thoughtful reflections in this dataset—those entering community literacy can do rich and meaningful work to make sense of their own trajectories when offered the opportunity. Graduate instructors and mentors can work to create a supportive space for novice community literacy workers to process their own evolving stances toward critical awareness and commitment to action in light of the network of factors at play.

I offer the critical hope matrix as one tool to guide this kind of reflective thinking. When I introduced a draft of the critical hope matrix at the end of my graduate class, stressing that the matrix was descriptive and not evaluative, several students remarked that it helped them explore their orientations to critical hope, and they suggested the matrix might be useful to engage throughout the semester. Through private freewrites, journal entries for a mentor, or peer conversations (e.g. the peer-led interviews used during the final class session in this study), the matrix can spark open-ended reflection. People can identify their location on the matrix—or propose an alternate version of the matrix that better describes their situation. How has their orientation to critical hope changed over time? What forces are acting on them now? What responses might they offer to those dynamics? Naming and reflecting on these dynamics can offer opportunities for those new to community literacy to better understand their own actions and emotions, receive affirmation and support from others, and brainstorm about possibilities in light of their own unique constellation of ecological factors. Setting aside regular space for this kind of reflection is one way to support others as they work through questions related to critical hope. Several students described the reflection groups that met weekly during our class as a generative space for processing their experiences with community literacy and their changing stances toward critical hope, for example. Similarly, Kendall Leon, Laurie A. Pinkert, and Kathryn Trauth Taylor argue for substantive reflection opportunities to support instructors who are teaching a community writing course for the first time, identifying regular journal entries and group reflection interviews as powerful tools. These reflective moments can be generative opportunities for normalizing the difficulty of engaging critical hope. Those new to community literacy work need to hear that everyone struggles with critical hope. Talking openly about these challenges makes it easier for a group to share their own struggles, appreciate small steps, mitigate implicit expectations, and better process challenges when they inevitably arise.

Critical hope is not a permanent mindset that one can achieve through an intellectual realization—it is constantly shifting, decaying, transforming, and reemerging. This means that wrestling with critical hope is a life-long process. And while some will continue to grapple with critical hope in community-university partnership sites for literacy work, others may pursue a broader version of critical hope, dwelling in the tension between action and critical vision in other locations, such as college composition classrooms, departmental hiring committees, or school board meetings. Regardless of the setting, it is crucial to navigate the push and pull between a critical awareness of harmful dynamics and a commitment to moving forward in the work of change. This makes supporting others as they engage the tensions in critical hope one of the most important aspects of teaching and mentoring in community literacy—more so, perhaps, than mastering the big names in literacy studies, learning to write a book review for *Community Literacy Journal*, or

strengthening skills in leading poetry workshops for local youth. Those of us who teach, mentor, or research at the intersections of literacy studies and composition have struggled with our own version of the questions in critical hope, within or beyond community literacy, and we understand the weight and uncertainty of this dispositional work. Thankfully, mentoring others in critical hope does not require providing set answers, but rather creating room for people to process, reflect, and then ask the questions that they need to ask.

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NOTES

EDITORIAL NOTES

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ⁱⁱThe full list of contributors to this workbook is Sharon Stein, Cash Ahenakew, Elwood Jimmy, Vanessa De Oliveira Andreotti, Will Valley, Sarah Amsler, Bill Calhoun, and the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective.

AUTHOR NOTES

¹Conducting research on one’s own class is ethically fraught, and the facilitators of the SoTL program I was participating in helped our faculty cohort—all of whom were conducting research on our own classes—to navigate the power dynamics involved. In my case, one step was to only study activities that would have been included in the class for pedagogical reasons, whether or not I was conducting a study. My reading and experience at this point had led me to genuinely believe that reflection on critical hope was beneficial to all students in a class such as this, and it was these reflection opportunities that became my data set. Another step was having a colleague introduce the study and collect consent forms while I was out of the room, while emphasizing that participation was entirely optional, to attempt to mitigate some of the pressure to participate. A third step was altering the study protocol to allow for more student flexibility and less student labor, even though this was not in the best interest of the study, when COVID hit. Ethical challenges remain, and I continue to grapple with the complexity of studying my own pedagogical practice, even as I believe this kind of scholarship allows me to more deeply attend to and critically reflect on my teaching practice in conversation with others in the field.

²For example, we read Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who problematizes the epistemological dichotomy between researchers and researched through a decolonial lens; Eve Tuck, who details a participatory

action research project with youth; and several pieces on photovoice as a participatory method (a method we practiced in class to identify and explore pressing grad student concerns, which led to creation of a department initiative to redistribute office furniture to graduate students during lockdown). While this study is obviously not a full participatory action research project, inviting the research participants to interview each other and review and shape study conclusions—rather than just providing raw data to be analyzed by me—is a more participatory approach than traditional qualitative research. I have written elsewhere about critiques of participatory methods as less rigorous, and why I believe participatory methods can often be more impactful and valid than traditional approaches in community-based research contexts (Shah).

³A small number of students submitted extended reflective freewrites instead of the peer interviews, an option designed to offer more flexibility to students during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴Editor and anonymous peer reviewer feedback from *Literacy in Composition Studies* also informed the reflection tool and discussion. Specifically, based on this feedback, I changed one quadrant's name from "disengagement" to "non-engagement," which is a more neutral term that better matches my argument about that quadrant that emerged from student insights, and I included the contextual factors as part of the figure, which were heavily emphasized in my discussion (and the students' insights), but not originally part of the figure itself.

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Mothering Through Barbed Wire and Literacy Barriers: The Role of Literacy in Incarcerated Motherhood

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KEYWORDS

maternal incarceration; jail; literacy; letters; intensive mothering

INTRODUCTION

Prison literacy scholars have continually drawn attention to the dangers of prioritizing skill-based forms of literacy in education programs behind bars. Skill-based forms of literacy not only offer the false promise of upward mobility and social inclusion during reentry (Shelledy), but they also foster hyperindividualization (Kling), which leads incarcerated individuals to believe that their incarceration and other events in their lives are simply the outcome of their ability to make good or bad decisions. To confront the erasure of systemic oppression that heavily contributes to the incarceration of marginalized populations, prison literacy scholars prioritize pedagogies that confront the literacy myth and foster collaboration. In addition to teaching skills that can be applied to academic success or job placement, prison literacy pedagogies encourage incarcerated individuals to explore identities (theirs and others) (Hinshaw), create literacy events (Plemons), and circulate counternarratives (Curry and Jacobi). While these pedagogies are successful in critiquing power dynamics, literacies, identities, and public perceptions as they relate to confinement, my research with incarcerated mothers demonstrates a need to expand these pedagogies to include the interrogation of additional institutions like the ideology of motherhood. Drawing from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved study with incarcerated mothers, I illustrate how their literacy practices are influenced and constrained by the institution of motherhood as well as by their confinement.

To examine the relationships between literacy, confinement, and motherhood, I circulated questionnaires to mothers incarcerated at a Texas county jail. Mothers' responses to questions regarding their perceptions of motherhood indicated that their definitions of a mother are informed by the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays). Intensive mothering, which I say more about later, is a dominant mothering discourse that maintains mothers are best fit to serve as their children's primary caregivers, should prioritize their children over themselves, and should engage in expert-level skills to meet their child's every need (Hays). Additionally, mothers' responses to questions regarding their letter-writing practices and conversations with their children revealed that intensive mothering also informed their use of autonomous models of literacy. Brian Street states an autonomous model of literacy is "the view that literacy in itself has consequences irrespective of, or autonomous of, context"

(48). Autonomous models of literacy, like intensive mothering dictate that there is an objective and accurate way of doing things. Additionally, mothers' interest in education-based programming as a resource to support their mothering demonstrates that the value correctional facilities place on skill-based literacies reinforces this notion of "correctness." Mothers' questionnaire responses collectively conveyed that their understanding of motherhood drove them to apply autonomous models of literacy to fulfill their roles as mothers during confinement.

While mothers' strides towards correctness can be interpreted as an attempt to conform to normativity, using motherhood studies to drive my analysis of incarcerated mothers' questionnaire responses allows me to situate their literacy habits as a way reject exclusion. According to Deseriee Kennedy, incarcerated mothers are a population who are often characterized as unfit mothers even before incarceration due their gender, racial, cultural, and/or economic backgrounds. As such, them appropriating dominant discourses of motherhood and literacy to perform motherhood should be accepted as a form of agency. Therefore, I argue that incarcerated mothers' use of autonomous models of literacy to meet intensive mothering standards is an act of resistance. However, careful not to discount the harm autonomous models of literacy impose, I reference mothers' questionnaire responses to suggest pedagogical practices that can help marginalized populations navigate the institutions that shape the way they engage with personal relationships and help them more consciously choose the literacies they believe will best help them maintain these relationships. In doing so, I take up Alexandra Cavallaro's call for scholars to "make room for stories that show who the individual is in the world, stories that focus on *connectivity*" (11).

This article begins by tracing the connection between literacy and incarceration, after which I situate feminist mothering as a theoretical framework. I then go on to overview my study design and introduce participating mothers before presenting mothers' questionnaire responses and concluding with pedagogical recommendations.

LITERACY'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE US CARCERAL SYSTEM

Intricately intertwined with the US carceral system, literacy has been named both a contributor to incarceration rates and an intervention to recidivism. Prison literacy scholars commonly turn to Eric Darnell Pritchard to conceptualize the relationship between literacy and confinement, as their notion of literacy normativity helps explain why confined populations rely on literacy for support, although it has previously been weaponized against them (Cavallaro; Middleton). Pritchard defines literacy normativity as the "use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm" (31). He goes on to explain that "literacy normativity consists of the creation of discourses that marginalize, ostracize, and condemn people for their identities and other ways of being" (31). The correlation between low literacy levels and incarceration, then, is not because those with basic reading and writing skills are more inclined to commit crime, but because this population has been ostracized from systems of support. This marginalization causes individuals

with low literacy levels to be forced into circumstances where they engage in illegal activities to cope or survive.

Incarcerated mothers are among those who have been victimized by literacy normativity in multiple ways. In addition to being cut off from resources, mothers' lower literacy levels impede their ability to mother. Serving as their children's first educator has historically been a part of a mother's primary role (Crooks; Hays; Willson Toso), so when mothers are not able to contribute to or advance their children's literacy development, it is considered a failure on their part. Incarcerated mothers are also othered because their racial identities, economic backgrounds, and their incarceration exclude them from constructed definitions of a "good" mother. Dominant discourses of motherhood reserve "good" mothering for white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, married white women (Hays). Incarcerated mothers, in contrast, are largely single mothers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and/or are women of color (Kennedy). Dominant mothering discourses also maintain that mothers are best fit to serve as their children's primary caregiver, should prioritize their children over themselves, and should engage in expert-level skills to meet their children's every need (Hays). Imprisonment prevents mothers from meeting these expectations. Thus, literacy normativity renders incarcerated mothers deficient.

The perception of incarcerated mothers, and other incarcerated individuals, as deficient becomes a way to label them as "non-normative citizens" (Cavallaro 5). Invoking the language of citizenship to describe their goals, Cavallaro argues that prison programs promote the appeal of transforming offenders from "non-normative citizens" to "good citizens" (5). Like other prison literacy scholars, Cavallaro critiques prison education programs for teasing literacy as a means to a second chance without "considering the particular challenges incarcerated people face in actually achieving this vision of citizenship" (2). Maggie Shelledy's study with formerly incarcerated individuals confirms that the "cruel optimism" of prison education programs gives those confined false hope, as they are still denied civic and social inclusion post-release, despite their success with academic literacy on the inside. Rebecca Kling adds that prison education's "remedial" approach to teaching literacy fosters a hyperindividualization that erases the power structures that marginalize incarcerated individuals and places the responsibility of incarceration solely on the individual.

Cavallaro confirms that prison education programs encourage hyperindividualization by positioning incarceration as a series of "bad individual choices" and frames the decision to no longer make bad choices as another individual choice (11). Along with "an image of the kind of 'good citizen' they will create through educational opportunities," prison education programs promote the job preparation and transferable skills they offer to situate themselves as a necessary resource to prevent recidivism (Cavallaro 7). This framing foregrounds literacy and education as a way to transition oneself into an "acceptable" law abiding citizen who can contribute to society, a transition replicated in incarcerated individuals' narratives of transformation (Cavallaro 9). Seeing themselves represented in the media as "lowlifes, cruel, mentally deranged, stupid, comically inept" (Toso 22), incarcerated individuals feel pressure to produce certain forms of writing to counter these negative perceptions (Curry and Jacobi). Michelle Curry and Tobi Jacobi admit that even though programs like SpeakOut!, their writing workshop for incarcerated individuals, aim to "encourage creative

counternarratives, it is impossible to ignore the reinscription of power dynamics that sponsorship by institutions of corrections and higher education impose upon the form and content of the work produced” (9).

For instance, Erec Toso explains that to publish their counternarratives, incarcerated individuals must “present [their] experience in a way that most readers will find interesting or comprehensible,” which requires working on “language, rhetorical strategies, syntax, form” (23). Literacy sponsors like prison education programs, publishers, and correctional facilities heavily influence how incarcerated individuals perceive themselves and how they write about their experiences. The way in which prison education positions literacy as an ideal that can be used to redeem oneself from the “civil death” of imprisonment explains why incarcerated mothers embrace autonomous models of literacy. “Conforming one’s practices to an ideological frame,” according to Andrea Olinger, can “provide a feeling of security” in that writers may see themselves “performing membership in particular communities” (19). Because literacy sponsors like correctional facilities and dominant discourses of motherhood associate autonomous models of literacy with correctness, as I expand on in later sections of this article, incarcerated mothers perceive autonomous literacies as the remedy to their “deviance.” Although incarcerated mothers are using literacy to engage with their children, rather than a wider public audience, they still feel a similar pressure to say things “correctly” to avoid having their narrated transformation rejected by their loved ones.

To combat the hyperindividualization literacy imposes on incarcerated individuals, prison literacy scholars advocate for fostering collaboration within writing spaces located in correctional facilities (Kling; Curry and Jacobi; Hinshaw; Plemons). More specifically, Kling urges prison literacy educators to “encourag[e] the inmates to step outside the role of self-examining subjects in need of rehabilitation” (70). The anonymous writing exchange Wendy Hinshaw facilitated between a class of undergraduate English majors and a class of writers at a South Florida prison is one such example of a prison education course that moves beyond just using literacy as a tool for rehabilitation. This exchange prompted writers to collectively apply rhetorical listening to engage in dialogue, practice situating themselves within their partnership and identify “the different social, cultural, and institutional contexts from which we entered” (Hinshaw 56). In doing so, Hinshaw states, “the exchange worked to shift how—and whether—we identify ourselves within systems and conditions of criminal injustice” (56). Creating a space where incarcerated writers can converse with the public enables both parties to challenge their social views, which helps to shift their identities and their perception of other’s identities.

Anna Plemons’ Family Arts (FA) writing exchange similarly uses literacy to connect incarcerated writers with the outside world by teaching them lessons on writing principles and then providing supplies for participants to teach a loved one the lesson via correspondence. Like Hinshaw, Plemons frees incarcerated individuals from the constraints of literacy as rehabilitation, granting them agency in how they apply their acquired literacy skills. Even more significant is the program’s focus on connecting incarcerated individuals with loved ones through literacy practices and events. Literacy events, according to William Muth’s examination of fathers’ participation in a week-long mural-making project with their children, offer an opportunity for families to have intimate, vulnerable

conversations where they can “coconstruct new texts about themselves and sometimes closed them down” (338). While the ways incarcerated mothers use literacy to connect with their children are underexplored in prison and family literacy scholarship, family literacy scholars have found that participating in literacy events with their children and developing their children’s literacy practices has positive impacts on mothers’ and their children’s literacy development (Al-Salmi and Smith; Kim and Deschambault; Saavedra and Preuss; Willson Toso).

Despite the benefits literacy may offer incarcerated individuals in respect to their identities, writing, and/or familial relationships, we, of course, have to be mindful of how we intervene in literacy learning. Literacy, as Logan Middleton describes it, is “a chameleonic tool,” in that it “can take on multiple meanings and values enacted by actors in carceral institutions” (4). On the one hand, literacy sponsors use literacy to regulate incarcerated individuals through policies, sanctions, and education (Middleton). On the other hand, incarcerated individuals use literacy to create counternarratives, build connections, and explore their identities. Prison literacy scholars recognize this critical tension among literacies and continue to interrogate both literacy violence and the positive power of literacy (Cavallaro). The rapidly growing number of women grappling with being a mother behind bars urges prison literacy scholars to explore the role literacy plays in performing motherhood during confinement. Additionally, like the immigrant and migrant families that family literacy scholarship (Al-Salmi and Smith; Kim and Deschambault; Simon) tends to focus on, incarcerated mothers are attempting to access literacy through multiple barriers, making it necessary for us to include them in conversations exploring how marginalized mothers use literacy to build connections with their children. Understanding incarcerated mothers’ literacy choices and needs will help us create prison literacy pedagogies that confront the way in which literacy regulates personal relationships and will offer strategies for using literacy to mend and maintain these personal relationships.

“Exploring the relationship between literacy and maternal incarceration offers an opportunity to interrogate how literacy operates at the intersection of motherhood and confinement, two different types of institutions that both inflict literacy normativity to restrict and regulate individuals.”

MOTHERHOOD AS A SITE FOR AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

Applying a feminist maternal framework, I use motherhood studies to advance our understanding of the nature in which literacy constructs and is constructed by the material realities of institutions (Middleton). Kim and Deschambault remind us that literacy practices involve values, beliefs, and attitudes that we cannot see (45). Using a feminist maternal framework enables me to make visible the unseen contributors that contextualize incarcerated mothers’ literacy practices and events. Exploring the relationship between literacy and maternal incarceration offers an opportunity to interrogate

how literacy operates at the intersection of motherhood and confinement, two different types of institutions that both inflict literacy normativity to restrict and regulate individuals. Knowing that mothers and incarcerated individuals have (re)appropriated literacy to resist heteronormativity within these institutions separately, it is important to investigate how incarcerated mothers engage with literacy to navigate these institutions simultaneously. To that end, this article is driven by the following questions: Do the ways in which motherhood and confinement impose literacy normativity conflict with or reinforce each other? How are incarcerated mothers' literacy habits informed by these two institutions? How do their perceptions of literacy impact their identities as mothers?

To answer these questions, I draw from motherhood scholarship to establish a feminist maternal framework. Feminist mothering, according to Andrea O'Reilly, is a practice that counters patriarchal motherhood (4). For O'Reilly, feminist motherhood is a political site wherein mothers can affect social change through socialization of children and the world at large through political-social activism. In defining feminist mothering, O'Reilly is careful to highlight the distinction between feminist and empowered mothering. Like empowered mothering, feminist mothering "emphasiz[es] maternal authority and ascrib[es] agency to mothers and value to motherwork" (O'Reilly 7). Feminist mothering, however, involves "a larger awareness of, and challenge to, the gender (among other) inequities of patriarchal culture" (O'Reilly 8). Incarcerated mothers' choice to mother through the structural violence of gender, racial, and social inequality along with incarceration is an example of feminist mothering. Moreover, incarcerated mothers' reappropriation of literacy to help them maintain relationships with their children and counter narratives of neglect serves to resist dominant discourses of motherhood. Through a feminist maternal framework, I call attention to the unique ways institutions use literacy normativity to label incarcerated mothers deficient and identify forms of resistance and agency in their mothering discourse.

A feminist maternal framework is useful in understanding the literacy normativity to which incarcerated mothers are subjected. Literacy scholars working with mothers (Rivera and Lavan; Willson Toso) have previously taken up a feminist maternal framework to investigate how pursuing formal literacy instruction aids marginalized mothers in rejecting stigmas of being lazy, uneducated, and/or unfit that are fueled by discourses associated with their ethnic or economic backgrounds. Recognizing the barriers that interfere with families' access to and application of literacy, in addition to interpreting the ways parents use literacy to parent and connect with their children, are central aspects of family literacy scholarship (Al-Salmi and Smith; Alvarez; Simon). Following these scholars, I consider "multiple marginality," or the ways sociocultural circumstances lead incarcerated mothers to experience various forms of discrimination (Kennedy). In doing so, I make visible the "multiple, local, and contextual" literacies (Richey and Evans 4), that serve to regulate mothers by prescribing a "narrow set of idealized behaviors" (Crooks 103). In this way, I follow Cinthya M. Saavedra and Cara L. Preuss, questioning "the very epistemological and ontological underpinnings of literacy knowledge as a western construct that disciplines more often than liberates marginalized groups" (185–86).

RESEARCHING MOTHERHOOD FROM OUTSIDE THE BARBED WIRE

Like other prison literacy scholars (Berry; Cavallaro; Shelledy), I am interested in the ways incarcerated individuals apply literacy to navigating barriers during incarceration and creating pathways to transition into the next phases of their lives: post-incarceration. Because mothering has such a serious impact on this process, I find it necessary to prioritize incarcerated mothers in our conversations regarding literacy's relationships with confinement. To understand how incarcerated mothers are suppressed by and/or engage with literacy during confinement, I circulated questionnaires to mothers incarcerated in a county jail located in Texas. My initial goal was to conduct in-depth interviews with mothers in prison, as the lengthy sentences being served in prisons offer a stability that reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of individuals being released or transferred during the research process. Due to the delays created by a combination of university and prison bureaucracy, such as completing the IRB approval process for both institutions and waiting to be assigned a prison, I was not able to collect data in this way. Fortunately, I established rapport with jail personnel through a separate project who, after a year of working together, invited me to conduct research at their facility. Because this prior project was not relevant to the topics of literacy or motherhood and did not involve me working with incarcerated individuals, I choose not to take up space discussing it further.

It is, however, worth noting how my relationship with jail personnel impacted my study design and my positionality. In response to jail personnel denying my request to conduct interviews, I decided to collect feedback via questionnaires. One of the limitations of using a questionnaire is that it unintentionally excludes individuals who are not confident in their writing abilities. For instance, asking mothers to write about their mothering and writing practices when they struggle with literacy impedes their ability to fully express themselves. However, the main benefit of the questionnaire was that it allowed me to bypass facility constraints and gain access to mothers in jail. Additionally, the questionnaire documents how writing shows up in these mothers' mothering practices, while simultaneously capturing some of their literacy practices. My altered study design also limited my interaction with participants to introducing the study, dropping off study materials, and picking up study materials. Doing what correctional facilities are designed to do, the jail kept me—an outsider—separate from insiders.

While the barbed wire barrier did prevent me from building rapport with participants, the positive I choose to take away is that the study unfolded in a way that allowed mothers to report their thoughts on motherhood and literacy without intervention. Much of prison literacy scholarship stems from research conducted through prison education programs or in collaboration with students who have participated in such programs. Though prison literacy programs foster literacy learning in necessary ways, they do influence the ways incarcerated individuals perceive, learn, and apply literacy. Being kept separate from my participants, although not ideal, reduced my influence as a literacy sponsor. I'd be naïve not to assume that my title as a researcher alone did not in some

way affect how participants responded to questionnaire responses. But my absence did remove the potential for participants to seek out my opinion about their literacy or mothering practices. Put in another way, conducting research with mothers via questionnaires allowed me to center their existing thoughts, habits, and practices without influence or judgement.

My questionnaire design was informed by the notion that incarcerated mothers use letters to build bonds with their children and maintain contact during separation (Enos; Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow; Sparks, Stauss, and Grant). While this scholarship attests to the benefits of writing letters, as they are one of the more accessible forms of communication in terms of financial and geographical barriers, it is not yet clear how literacy impacts mothers' letter writing. Moreover, the influence literacy has on mothers' perceptions of motherhood, and vice versa, is still an underexplored topic in prison and family literacy scholarship. As such, the questionnaire asked mothers to define their understanding of a mother, discuss their written communication with their children, and share any concerns they may have about their writing when corresponding with their children. To encourage mothers to express how they feel as mothers, rather than how they've been made to feel, the questionnaire purposely does not ask about their convictions.

At the time questionnaires were circulated, there were twenty women residing in the facility. Eight of these twenty mothers completed and returned questionnaires. The eight mothers who participated in my study range in age from 19 to 45. Four of these mothers identified as Hispanic or Latinx, three as white, and one as Black. Most of the mothers had three biological children, with five children being the most and one child being the least. To get to know mothers, despite our limited interaction, I assigned them a pseudonym and asked them questions about themselves, such as where they are from, what are their favorite hobbies, what makes them a good mom, and what advice do they have for other incarcerated mothers. I also preserved the idiosyncrasies in their writing (spelling and capitalizations). Below is a brief bio for each mother.

Janevah is 26 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to dance, play soccer, and jet ski. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "Even at our toughest moments we stick as a family & have great respect & manners towards each other." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to "Stay positive, keep faith & put God first. Romans 12:12- When you hope, be joyful. When you suffer be patient. When you pray, be faithful."

Denise is 45 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to read, cook, and organize. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "My love." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, "One day all this will be over. You need patience Educate yourself."

Vanessa is 36 and has five children. She is from Tennessee and likes to swim, play pool, tennis and volleyball, and sing. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "I give my cHildren Lots of Love I usually try to spoil tHem Everyonce in a wHile." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, "I would Let tHem Know That EveN tHougH you are going To prison & you are a mom well you'll always be a mom to your kids No Matter wHat I would tell woman To Read tHeir bibles & kNow tHat god Has tHem always & That tHis to sHall Pass & Your cHildreN will always Love you No matter wHat."

Robin is 31 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes social media, working out, taking

pictures, listening to music, and dancing. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “No matter what I’m always there aNd Never give up.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “Do better IN life.”

Sarah is 19 and has one child. She is from Texas and likes working out, drawing, canoeing, dancing, playing video games, and “Jammin.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to, “Keep the faith. There is a reason for eeverything. Kids are gonna be kdis and just pour out your love to them and believe you will hold them some day Gotta keep your head up.”¹

Vicki is 38 and has two children. She is from Washington and likes social media, drawing, playing on the computer, and photography. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “When I do see my kids, we have plenty of fun, and they know I love them, but what really makes me a good mother is realizing when they would be better off with someone else.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “Don’t be overwhelmed, and stay positive, Stay strong.”

Keara is 36 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to read. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “Being able to teach them love, respect, communication, how to do household things like eat, sit down, talk, how to help other people.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to, “Advise them to have patience and be encouraged to move forward, espically asking God a lot. For him nothing is impossible.”

Lorissa is 41 and has one biological child and two stepchildren. She is from Missouri and likes riding motorcycles, reading, and walking. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “That even though we are living in different states that I try to be in contact with them that I listen to my kids and let them Vent to me.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “To focus on themselves to change themselves because they need to understand its there actions that got them in here and there family wont be better until they get better. To find your (inlegible) spirt and love themseleves.”

While generalizations cannot be drawn from a sample this size, responses from these eight mothers still elicit counterstories (Martinez) to the publicly perpetuated belief that these mothers neglected their duties as mothers and their children are better off without them because of it. Providing a platform for counterstories is especially important in prison literacy scholarship as it helps to shift the field away from “discourses of transformation [that] can inadvertently result in saviorism, academic tourism, or outside people thinking that we’re [incarcerated individuals] in need of redemption” (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad 18). Presenting incarcerated individuals experience of writing, Larry Barrett, Pablo Mendoza, Logan Middleton, Mario Rubio, and Thomas Stromblad argue, “validates lived and experiential knowledge” produced by people from underrepresented backgrounds and reveals “underrepresented ideas about prison literacies” (19). An underrepresented population within family and prison literacy scholarship, I contend that incarcerated mothers’ responses, albeit not substantial narratives, are valuable in that they too prompt new conversations within the field.

As stated in the previous section, my analysis of questionnaire responses are guided by a feminist maternal framework. Following Saavedra and Preuss’ advice to (re)read and (re)imagine “(m) Others” as having agency in order to empower rather than “(dis)empower,” I examine questionnaire responses across two different phases (187). In the first phase I looked for themes, definitions, and

sentiments that mimicked, repeated, or embraced the role of literacy propelled in the dominant mothering discourses. In the second phase, I considered the cross-cultural contexts these mothers were mothering in to identify possibilities of resistance to dominant mothering discourses. My reading of questionnaire responses reveals incarcerated mothers' literacy practices stem from their definitions of a mother, which are informed by an intensive mothering ideology that reinforces autonomous models of literacy. Considering their position as marginalized mothers who have been victimized by literacy normativity, I consider their attempts to appropriate dominant discourses of mothering and literacy to perform mothering as a form of resistance.

“[A MOTHER IS] A HERO SHE CAN FIX ANYTHING
AND MAKE THINGS BETTER”:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MOTHERING AND LITERACY

In this section I present the ways incarcerated mothers define a mother's role. I situate their definitions within dominant discourses of motherhood and then discuss the literacies these discourses are often connected with. Tracing the literacies linked to mothers' perceptions of motherhood helps to conceptualize their shared literacy practices, which I present in the following sections.

As Curry and Jacobi so eloquently state, “upon entering confinement, a jailed person becomes an ‘inmate’ . . . stripped of the many ‘selves’ we value as humans: self-express, self-esteem, self-worth” (5). For incarcerated mothers, one of the “selves” they are stripped of is their identity as mothers (Enos). Janet Garcia-Hallett explains that because incarceration separates mothers from their children, it is perceived as an indicator that a mother neglected her children, which contradicts traditional conceptions of motherhood. The first step to mothering behind bars, then, is for mothers to (re)construct their identities by realigning their individual characters and mothering practices with acceptable mothering discourses (Enos; Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow). Taking this initial step into consideration, I asked mothers to “Tell me what your definition of a mother is?”

Collectively, incarcerated mothers defined a mother as someone who is caring; nurturing; and provides her children with love and financial, emotional, and educational support. Some mothers clarified that a mother cares for, protects, and loves all of her children, including “biological and stepchildren.” Mothers used words such as, “protector,” “provider,” “Doctor,” and “Bestfriend” in their descriptions. In addition to stating a mother is responsible for taking care of her children's physical needs, five incarcerated mothers used terms such as “teacher” and “counselor” to express that a mother should also educate her children. Using one mother's response to sum up these descriptions, a mother is someone who is “a hero she can fix anything and makes things better,” and a mother should “help their children get ahead in all circumstances.” These definitions of a mother illustrate a belief that a “good” mother prioritizes their children over everything else. Mothers' responses also echo the traditional role of femininity in motherhood, which is furthermore reinforced by their descriptions of themselves.

In contrast to dominant discourses of motherhood that restrict women's identities to that of their role as mothers (Hays), feminist maternal scholarship aims to recognize the varying identities mothers possess, encouraging them to prioritize their interests in the same way they do for their children (O'Reilly). Following this guiding principle, I asked mothers to "Please list three words that best describe you?" While some mothers said "funny," "lively" or "Adventures," mothers collectively conveyed that they are trustworthy, caring, and nurturing. Most mothers used adjectives such as, "friendly," "very godly," "outgoing," and "generous"—or synonyms for these words—to describe themselves. The adjectives that mothers use reflect behaviors typically linked to femininity. Constructing an identity that aligns with societal norms relating to gender or citizenship, for instance, is common among incarcerated individuals, as they have been made to feel that exhibiting "appropriate" behaviors is a sign of rehabilitation. Because incarceration is contradictory to popular conceptions of motherhood (Garcia-Hallett), it makes sense that mothers would describe themselves with adjectives that allude to femininity and in turn affirm their identities as mothers. This is not to say that these self-descriptors are disingenuous, but rather to speculate that mothers are intentional in cohesively (re)constructing their identities as mothers. Sharon Hays explains that the mother employs purity, morality, self-sacrifice, strength, and the reproductive body, among other things. By describing themselves in a way that aligns with their views on motherhood, incarcerated mothers solidify their identities as mothers.

Consistent with other incarcerated mothers, the ways in which these mothers describe and define motherhood is reflective of the intensive mothering ideology (Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow). Drawing from intensive mothering to (re)construct their identities as mothers is common among incarcerated mothers, Lana Marlow explains, because they typically adapt their definitions from media representations of motherhood, which equate "good" mothering with intensive mothering. Intensive mothering, according to Hays, necessitates that mothers should sacrifice their own desires and entrench themselves in their identities as mothers because children should be cared for primarily by their mother and children should be treated as sacred (54). Under the principles of intensive mothering, mothers are expected use expert-guided methods for child-rearing to deduce and attend to their children's emotional, physical, moral, and educational needs. While mothers' responses are indicative of all these expectations, for the purpose of this article, I focus on their desire to educate their children.

Mothering and literacy are intertwined in that dominant discourses of mothering, like intensive mothering, designate mothers as their child's primary educator (Crooks; Willson Toso). This designation alone is not necessarily restrictive, but the expectation for mothers to educate their children not only makes them responsible for their children's success, but for their children's failures, which is problematic. The link between "good" mothering and their children's educational success can pressure mothers into adapting skill-based literacies, which can be described as autonomous models of literacy. While adhering to some aspects of autonomous models of literacy can sometimes result in favorable outcomes, Blaire Willson Toso warns that skill-based literacy discourses are "free of context," meaning, "literacy acquisition is considered a cognitive function achieved through practice and motivation unaffected by social or structural differences" (Willson Toso 148). Like intensive

mothering, other autonomous models of literacy prioritize individual responsibility and ignore the social and cultural contexts that contribute to outcomes. In this way, literacy and mothering naturalize each other (Willson Toso).

A form of literacy normativity, intensive mothering enforces gender norms and regulates mothers' family decisions, reducing their autonomy. While Hays declares that intensive mothering is understood to be the "socially appropriate child rearing" ideology in the US, she is careful to emphasize that this dominant mothering ideology is not a choice made by women (9). Rather, she explains, "it is an indication of the power of men, whites, the upper classes, capitalists, and state leaders to impose a particular form of family life on those less powerful than themselves" (Hays 153). Mothers' definitions and descriptions of motherhood demonstrate that they have embraced a normative discourse of mothering previously used to marginalize them. Rather than viewing this understanding of motherhood as a concession to normativity, I situate these mothers' adaptations of intensive mothering as acts of agency, as reappropriating intensive mothering challenges the deficit discourses used to stigmatize them as unfit.

"MY SPELLING OR THE WAY I COME ACROSS TO THEM RUDE OR CAREING": PERFORMING INTENSIVE MOTHERING WITH AUTONOMOUS LITERACIES

In this section, I draw from mothers' letter-writing habits to demonstrate how incarcerated mothers use autonomous models of literacy to fulfill their definitions of a mother. In addition to focusing on mothers' descriptions of a mother as a teacher, I prioritize their references to schooling in conversations with their children, and their request for programming as a resource to improve their mothering practices. In doing so, I draw attention to how incarcerated mothers appropriate two normative discourses to navigate motherhood behind bars.

To gain a better understanding of the role literacy plays in mothering behind bars, I asked incarcerated mothers questions about the letters they write to their children. Five mothers said that they write letters to their children. When asked, "What are some of the things/topics you talk about in the letters you send to your child(ren)," mothers shared that they apologize for "breaking the law," ask about family and pets, talk to them about their health and emotions, and check in with them about how they are doing in school. Mothers' interest in their children's education reflected their belief that one of their roles as a mother is to teach their children. In response to the question, "What kinds of questions do you ask your child(ren) in your letters," mothers shared that when discussing their children's schooling they ask, "how's school" or "how are you doing in school." In addition to these general questions, mothers asked more pointed questions such as, "what tasks do you have," "what are you grades," and "are you behaving and stayin'g out of trouble?" Additionally, mothers said that they told their children they are smart, and one mother stated she used her letters to tell her children they "can accomplish anything in life."

Incarcerated mothers' focus on their children's schooling does align with the intensive mothering requirement to educate one's child; however, it is also a form of feminist mothering. Feminist mothering practices recognize inequities and develop practices to mother against and through them (O'Reilly). Existing research shows that marginalized mothers commonly use their role as their child's educator to guide their children to opportunities that were not accessible to them, helping them rise above the constraints of their social circumstances (Al-Salmi and Smith; Saavedra and Preuss; Simon; Willson Toso). As mothers who have been victimized by multiple normative discourses and have been cut off from society's resources, incarcerated mothers encouraging their children to pursue academic success is a way for them to counter stigmas characterizing them as incapable of raising productive children. Though I perceive incarcerated mothers' roles as teacher as a form of agency, it is important to note that the confidence they express when discussing their children's intellectual capability is distinctly different from the doubt they convey when talking about their own.

Incarcerated mothers participating in Leigh Sparks, Kimberly Strauss, and Kaitlin Grant's letter-writing workshop expressed concerns about communicating their feelings effectively. With this in mind, I asked mothers in my study, "What are you concerned about when you are writing letters to your children?" Mothers expressed concerns about spelling, tone, interpretation, and language barriers. For example, one mother said she contemplates whether to write in English or Spanish

“Rather than viewing this understanding of motherhood as a concession to normativity, I situate these mothers’ adaptations of intensive mothering as acts of agency, as reappropriating intensive mothering challenges the deficit discourses used to stigmatize them as unfit.”

because one of her children can “listen better [in Spanish], [but] not read in Spanish.” Another mother said she worried about “My spelling or the way I come across to them rude or caring,” and how her children would “Interpet [her] words.” Mothers’ apprehension about spelling attests to a perception of literacy as a standard, mechanist, and technical skill. This concept of correctness, according to Brian Street,

“dominates much formal thinking on language and literacy” (54). A part of what makes autonomous models of literacy dangerous is that they teach one set way of articulating oneself regardless of cultural, racial, economic, and gender differences. This limitation causes an obvious constraint for incarcerated mothers who are mothering at the intersection of multiple cultural, racial, economic, and gender differences.

Connecting back to mothers' definitions and descriptions of motherhood, their social and cultural differences may be a factor in why they seem to value skill-based literacies. Like autonomous models of literacy, intensive mothering not only fails to consider social and cultural differences but renders them a form of deviance. Furthermore, dominant mothering discourses convey a “[b]elief in literacy as order and cleanliness and ultimately good mothering” (Saavedrea & Preuss 188). The appearance of mothers' questionnaire responses can be interpreted as an example of this “order and

cleanliness.” When responding to some questions, such as “What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated” or “What are some of the things/topics you talk about with your child(ren),” many of the mothers listed their responses in columns. Restricted to a one-way discourse due to the study method, I cannot be certain why mothers listed some of their responses this way. However, it is worth noting that like motherhood scholars, prison literacy scholars have observed an association between tidiness and intelligence. Jacobi states, “prisoners often reveal a disconnect between an ingrained emphasis on neatness and handwriting-as-literacy and literacy as representative and reflective of their life experiences” (48).

This disconnect is especially complex for incarcerated mothers who are operating within the intersection of motherhood and incarceration, both of which use autonomous models of literacy to regulate them with ideas of correctness. The way in which the institutions of motherhood and confinement reinforce the same normative discourse is apparent in mothers’ choice of resources. When asked, “What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated,” half of the mothers said parenting classes, GED classes, and college courses. Ji Eun Kim and Ryan Deschambault’s work on mothering and autonomous models of literacy is helpful here in understanding the connection incarcerated mothers are making between mothering and educational programming. Referencing literacy scholar David Barton, Kim, and Deschambault state, “different institutions privilege different literacies, and in each institution, there is a dominant power that controls the use of literacy” (45). Incarcerated mothers’ perception of education-based programming as resources for mothering is in accordance with the value correctional facilities place on skill-based literacies. Similarly, to the way incarcerated individuals are encouraged to use programming to redeem themselves as citizens, programming is advertised as a tool to help mothers fulfill their roles as mothers (Sufrin).

Parenting classes, more directly than other programs, are offered as a necessary step for incarcerated parents, yet they can be potentially damaging to mothers. As I have argued elsewhere, these classes are a part of a power structure that correctional facilities use to surveil and regulate, or in the words of Marlow, “parent” incarcerated mothers. Carolyn Sufrin calls out parenting classes for not providing lessons on the “cultural stereotypes and policies that have vilified, in particular, black mothers who are over-represented in prisons and jails” (62). Rather than tackle the discourses that have disrupted parenting, and mothering specifically, parenting classes reinforce them, giving mothers the false hope that engaging in certain practices is what makes them “good” mothers. Similarly, the motivation to offer GED and college courses in correctional facilities heavily stems from the proven link between lower literacy levels and criminal activity. The assumed relationship between autonomous models of literacy and upward mobility not only dismisses other barriers contributing to recidivism, but it also effaces the types of literacies that incarcerated people engage in.

Just as it does with citizenship, literacy offers this “cruel optimism” (Shelley) that promises mothers they will become “better” parents, if they improve their literacy skills. Affirming the need to exhibit clarity, cleanliness, and correctness, education-based programming in correctional facilities reinforce the idea that good mothering requires mothers to adopt autonomous models of literacy.

Nonetheless, engaging in autonomous models of literacy to form and maintain relationships with their children allows mothers to pursue literacy learning opportunities for themselves, which may have been an inaccessible option prior to incarceration, and contribute to, or at the very least support, their children's literacy development.

“I LIKE TO WRITE ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES...
I ALSO LIKE TO WRITE MY GOALS, AND PRAYERS”:
COMPLICATING INTENSIVE MOTHERING
WITH PERSONAL WRITING

In this section I present mothers' personal writing habits to illustrate how mothers use writing to maintain a sense of self. Recognizing that mothers' personal writing reflects redemptive notions of literacy, I demonstrate how this writing allows them to challenge normative mothering discourses.

While the normativity imposed by a combination of intensive mothering and autonomous literacies cause some mothers to have concerns about their ability to communicate with their children effectively through letters, these discourses do not disrupt their personal writing habits. When asked “what types of writing do you engage in?,” mothers shared a range of genres including journaling, recording scriptures, and/or composing goodbye letters to their drug addictions. In response to the question, “I have read that researchers say writing empowers women who are in prison, do you agree with this? Why or why not?” all mothers said they agreed and described writing as a safe space where they could express their feelings without judgment. One mother confessed, “it's easier to deal with my thoughts and emotions and even organized my ideas,” and another mother said, “Yes/ Because: You have more peace, patience, and above all better words because you see things in other manner, and value everything you have.” The ease of writing described here contrasts the hesitation mothers indicated when writing to their children. I attribute this difference to mothers situating personal writing as a private space in which the rules of autonomous literacy and intensive mothering do not apply.

When asked, “What do you like to write about,” mothers shared a range of topics, such as “daily life./ Feelings./ Thoughts./ Kids./ Family,” “experiences, especially funny stuff,” “prayers,” and “Bible verses.” Writing for themselves gives mothers a sense of liberation and progression. One of the mothers described writing as a way to take “[her] mind to a different state.” Another mother stated writing gave her “peace, patience, and above all...the ability to see things in another manner.” Another mother shared that she likes to write because, “You feel accomplished. Satisfied. ‘Done.’” Mothers' feelings towards writing and what they write about echo the “inward” looking comments women made in Jacobi's writing workshop hosted at a women's correctional facility. Data collected from Jacobi's workshop suggested that the women joined the workshop with the same intent they have when participating in any type of programming, to “focus on individual change and often personal redemption” (45). While my questionnaire did not ask mothers if they are enrolled in a writing workshop, and their responses do not indicate that they are, they situate writing “primarily as expression

and emotional release,” as do the women in Jacobi’s workshop.

While autonomous models of literacy may not be impacting the mechanics of mothers’ personal writing, the association between literacy and redemption is still present. The way mothers describe using their personal writing to critically reflect on and overcome their past decisions, create plans for the future, and improve or establish spirituality, religious, and romantic connections is reflective of a “focus on individual rehabilitation and reform” (Jacobi 45). Jacobi posits that writers can greatly benefit from using writing as an emotional release but adds that there is much to be gained from using writing to produce critiques about systems of power and “for reclaiming control and power over one’s life and future beyond the usual rhetoric of individual responsibility and rehabilitation” (45). In agreement with Jacobi and other prison literacy scholars, I do believe that we need to maintain a critical stance toward redemptive accounts of literacy. However, because incarcerated mothers are operating at the intersection of multiple normative discourses, I find it necessary to consider how their use of redemptive literacies might be allowing them to challenge other forms of normativity.

Although incarcerated mothers’ personal writing appears to take on a transformative role, this writing creates a space separate from motherhood. The intensive mothering ideology necessitates that women claim the role of mother as their sole identity (Hays). In their definitions and descriptions of a mother, mothers agreed that mothering is an all-encompassing role. Yet, their personal writing interests and habits demonstrate that these mothers have in fact established an identity outside that of mother. For example, one of the mothers who stated that she believes writing is empowering because it “brings out strong feels,” “never” writes letters to her child. This mother described a mother as someone who is “always around,” but she chooses not to establish a presence with her child via letters, even though she values writing. In choosing to write for herself and not her child, this mother dictates what “always” and “around” means to her, taking control of the way she embodies and practices her definition of mothering. Additionally, when asked, “Tell me about something you’ve written that you are especially proud of?” mothers described pieces of writing that related to their sense of self, rather than their identity as mothers. For instance, one mother said, “I wrote to my husband Bible scriptures. I’ve NEVER done that.” Two other mothers said that they were most proud of the “goodbye” letters they wrote to their drug addictions. And another mother wrote, “I once wrote a short story about an incident which I had lost control, and my teacher told me my descriptive language was so well written that it painted a vivid picture in her head.”

The enjoyment and gratitude mothers associate with personal writing demonstrates an awareness that writing serves different purposes. Their personal writing, despite reflecting individual accounts of rehabilitation, is a display of agency as they use it to pursue activities and identities outside of those associated with motherhood. By prioritizing themselves and their children, these mothers resist the notion of having to be either be child-centered or self-centered. Incarcerated mothers, at least by way of public narratives, have been positioned as deviant dangerous moms, which is why they tend to (re)construct their identities as mothers using intensive mothering expectations that position them as subservient to their children. While mothers in this study followed this trend, their personal writing habits show that they also maintain a sense of self: applying intensive mothering practices where they see fit, but not simply conforming to them.

“[E]VEN THOUGH YOU ARE GOING TO PRISON & YOU ARE A MOM WELL YOU’LL ALWAYS BE A MOM...”: PRISON LITERACIES FOR INCARCERATED MOTHERS

In the same way prison programs position literacy as the key to rehabilitation, intensive mothering creates an idealized version of motherhood that leads mothers to believe they will feel fulfilled and rewarded for their good mothering efforts. Taking heed of the way autonomous literacies and intensive mothering naturalize each other in mothers’ descriptions of motherhood, literacy concerns, and requests for education-based program to support their mothering practices, I conclude with pedagogical recommendations that combine family and prison literacy scholarship. Combining family literacy’s attention to marginalized mothers with prison literacy’s approach to teaching rhetorical strategies to appropriate literacy can create pedagogies that address mothers’ literacy needs without enforcing normalcy. While discussed here with the intent to support mothers who are policed and surveilled by multiple institutions as they negotiate literacy at the intersection of motherhood and incarceration, such pedagogies are also relevant to other marginalized folks who are victimized by institutions of oppression.

Anna Plemons’ Family Arts (FA) writing exchange is a potential model for elevating incarcerated mothers’ identities as mothers rather than regulating them. The FA writing exchange situates incarcerated individuals as literacy mentors by supplying them with classroom instruction, curricular materials, and postage to correspond with a loved one on the outside. The FA writing

“Combining family literacy’s attention to marginalized mothers with prison literacy’s approach to teaching rhetorical strategies to appropriate literacy can create pedagogies that address mothers’ literacy needs without enforcing normalcy.”

exchange “consists of a twenty-four-part series of nonsequential lessons that address principles of writing practice and introduce students to writers whose work reflects those principles” (Plemons 90–91). The literacy mentors are then given the choice of sending these materials to their mentees or constructing their own. The FA writing

exchange liberates incarcerated individuals from the constraints of literacy by applying writing principles associated with academic success to building family connections. Plemons’ curricular materials, which she personally shared with me, encourages incarcerated individuals to see themselves as writers by centering writers from a diverse range of backgrounds who they can identify with.

In its current state, Plemons’ FA writing exchange would benefit incarcerated mothers by teaching them writing principles that directly address mothers’ literacy concerns and offering opportunities for them to contribute to their children’s literacy development, which supports their desire to serve as their children’s educators. However, a revised version of the FA writing exchange that includes materials on both writing and motherhood would enable mothers to confront the relationship between mothering and literacy that is heavily influencing their approach to both.

For instance, an effective exercise might be prompting mothers to reflect critically on discourses of motherhood. Patrick Berry tasks his students with composing literacy narratives “in which the prison is reimagined as another space that affords them a greater sense of agency” (152). Reflecting on the outcomes of this exercise, Berry states, “rather than simply forgetting about the all-too-real material conditions in which they lived, students in my class began to reimagine literacy and, more broadly, education in prison” (152).

Prison literacy educators’ approaches to teaching students to have a more critical understanding of language, power, and the US carceral system should be extended to other institutions like motherhood. Asking incarcerated individuals to identify other (ideological) institutions they occupy and then to reimagine themselves as having agency in that space could help mothers recognize aspects of motherhood they had not yet considered. Additionally, questioning the institutions they occupy can help mothers reevaluate their identities as mothers, giving them more of a choice in how they want to perform that role and granting them the opportunity to identify how their cultural differences influence their mothering and literacy practices. Taking into consideration that incarcerated mothers view letters as a site where they can perform motherhood, lessons that offer rhetorical strategies for establishing a productive dialogue can help mothers and their children learn about themselves and each other.

When asked, “What do you want your child(ren) to take away from these letters?” mothers expressed wanting to convey their care and love. One mother stated she wanted her children to take away, “Knowledge, Comfort, love, Peace.” Another mother said she wants her children to understand, “I don’t forget them and I worry for them, I write them that I love them with all my heart, I miss them.” And another mother she wants her children to know, “mommma Still is here aNd loves them so much.” Letter-writing workshops help incarcerated mothers express their emotions to their children with the support of prompts and some instructional guidance (Sparks, Stauss, and Grant), but they lack an emphasis on important strategies like rhetorical listening. Hinshaw argues that rhetorical listening allows us to recognize “the ways in which culturally constructed boundaries of difference shape our speaking and listening practices, and also provides strategies for engaging in cross-boundary communication” (56). Rhetorical listening can help mothers conceptualize how the boundaries of mothering discourses and confinement, among others, inform the way they and their children communicate. Additionally, teaching mothers to write as a way to listen can support their letter-writing goals by preparing them to acknowledge their children’s emotional needs so that they are contributing to a dialogue and not creating a one-way discourse.

Exposing incarcerated mothers to pedagogies that prioritize interrogating institutional normativity, rather than enforcing it, would grant them more conscious agency in their mothering and literacy practices. Family literacy scholarship recognizes that mothers mothering within cross-cultural contexts are often constrained by multiple, and sometimes conflicting, mothering discourses (Saavedra and Preuss; Willson Toso). Rather than offer mothers options for how they can honor, reject, or combine these multiple discourses, programming tends to advocate for dominant mothering discourses. For instance, Stacey Crooks found that community literacy programs prioritize teaching mothers’ literacy skills that can help them as their children’s educators, rather than offering skills that

can be applied to mothers' own interests. Similarly, in prison and jail, parenting programs reinforce patriarchal norms and don't give mothers much choice in how they want to pursue motherhood (Haney). In contrast, prison literacy pedagogies teach incarcerated individuals to be critical of dominant discourses and the institutions that impose them (Berry; Hinshaw; Jacobi).

To continue advancing our understanding of incarcerated mothers' literacy needs, future research should more directly investigate mothers' literacy learning experiences before and during incarceration. Given the way my study design impacted my findings, I recommend researchers do this work via interviews so not to create more literacy barriers. Additionally, I find it necessary to also identify how mothers' cross-cultural identities impact the way they navigate the relationship between mothering and literacy. There were differences in how mothers across racial backgrounds applied literacy to their mothering practices, but due to the small sample size I chose not to draw conclusions from those differences here.

NOTES

¹This mother did not answer the question “Tell me all of the things that make you a good mother.”

APPENDIX

Note: The questionnaire below is reprinted in its entirety, but formatting and spacing have been changed.

MOTHERHOOD QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you so much for filling out this questionnaire. Your voice and your experience are valuable. It may seem like a long questionnaire, but that is because I tried to give plenty of space for you to write out your answers. If you run out of space, you can use one of the blank pieces of paper attached to the questionnaire. Please remember to write the question number next to your answer. I look forward to reading what you have to say.

Demographics

The following section asks you basic information about yourself.

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) Where are you from (State or Country)?
- 3) Which ethnic background do you identify with?
- 4) Please list some of your favorite hobbies? (they can be current or past hobbies)
- 5) Please list three words that best describe you.

Child(ren)

The following section asks you questions about how you currently communicate with your child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 6) How many children do you have?
- 7) How do you communicate with your child(ren)? (Letters, Phone Calls, Visits, Other)
- 8) How many of your children are you in contact with? (Some, A Few, All)
- 9) What do you believe are the advantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?
- 10) What do you believe are the disadvantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?
- 11) If you use a different form of communication to contact each of your children, please explain which form of communication you use with each child.
- 12) If you have ever participated in video visitation while incarcerated, will you please share a bit about your
- 13) experience?

Letters

The following section asks you questions about what you say to your child(ren) in the letters you send to them. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be used to build relationships between mothers and their child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 13) How often do you send your child(ren) letters? (once a month, a twice a month, once a week, etc.)
- 14) How long does it usually take your child(ren) to respond to you?
- 15) How long are the letters you send to your children? (1–2 pages, 2–3 pages, 3–4 pages, etc.)
- 16) If you ever send poems, pictures, or other things with your letters, please describe what you send and why you send them.
- 17) What are some of the things/topics you talk about in the letters you send to your child(ren)?
- 18) What kinds of questions do you ask your child(ren) in your letters?
- 19) What do you want your child(ren) to take away from these letters?
- 20) How does knowing your child(ren)'s caretaker, a CO, or the parole board may see your letter influence the way you write the letter?
- 21) What differences have you noticed in your writing since you've been writing letters to your child(ren)?
- 22) What differences have you noticed in your child(ren)'s writing?
- 23) What are you concerned about when you are writing these letters?

Writing

The following section asks you questions about the other types of writing you might engage in. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be a productive and liberating exercise. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 24) What other types of writing do you engage in? (poems, short stories, memoir, class assignments, etc.).
- 25) How often do you write? (every day, twice a week, a few times a month, etc.)
- 26) What do you like to write about?
- 27) Tell me about something you've written that you are especially proud of?
- 28) I have read that researchers say writing empowers women who are in prison, do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Mothering

The following section asks you questions about being a mother who is incarcerated. The purpose of this section is to understand how mothers fulfill their roles as mothers while behind bars. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 29) How long have you been mothering behind bars?
- 30) What do you feel is the most difficult part about mothering from behind bars?
- 31) Is there a particular prison policy or rule that constrains your ability to mother behind bars?
- 32) Tell me what your definition of a mother is?
- 33) How has the way you define mother changed since you've been incarcerated?
- 34) What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated?
- 35) What advice would you give to mothers entering prison?
- 36) Tell me all of things that make you a good mother?

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The Decolonial Imperative in Basic Writing

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KEYWORDS

basic writing; decoloniality; literacy; historiography; antiracist pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

This article extends engagement with decolonial theories within Latinx writing studies, particularly by engaging the ways literacy has been taken up within Basic Writing scholarship. In what follows, I argue that coloniality and decoloniality are crucial resources for Basic Writing and literacy scholarship under the larger umbrella of literacy/composition/rhetoric (LCR) studies, and that in a symmetrical fashion a consideration of Basic Writing and the “politics of remediation” (Soliday) cannot be neglected or ignored within LCR studies’ decolonial turn if the decolonial imperative is to be achieved. To this point, I advance the following claims:

1. The decolonial turn in LCR studies presents a potent set of resources for teachers and scholars of Basic Writing in that it provides an epistemic framework of writing and literacy which will remain permanently agonistic against the “deficit model” of Basic Writing pedagogy.
2. The decolonial turn in LCR studies additionally serves a potent set of resources for teachers and scholars of Basic Writing insofar as it opens a space for Basic Writing’s advocates to intervene in public and institutional discourses about the “politics of remediation” by showing the influence of colonial discourses on higher education’s ideologies of literacy, especially in contexts removed from LCR studies.
3. Finally, the decolonial turn in LCR studies, in examining the histories and historiographies of Basic Writing (at the institutional and national level), can both update these histories and historiographies from an explicitly decolonial perspective and additionally augment decolonial efforts in the present by learning from struggles of the past.

At present, decolonization at the level of theory takes on two primary currents. The first is concerned with real political relations in the world, specifically those between Indigenous people and nations and the states and corporations seeking to dispossess them of life, land, resources, and so on. The latter, emanating from one side of a schism in the Latin American Subaltern Studies group

around the turn of the twenty-first century, considers decoloniality and decolonial work primarily at the level of architectures of knowledge, epistemologies, and the like. Without dismissing the value and crucial importance of the former (or even entirely accepting such a hard and fast distinction), my work here primarily engages the latter definition, in which I pursue, as Romeo García puts it, “efforts to break from terms (concepts) and contents (histories) tied to coloniality/modernity” and shifts “toward an-other epistemic reconstruction” (304).

Readers will notice that in reference to decolonial projects and turns in LCR scholarship, I use the term “decolonial imperative,” as opposed to “decolonial option,” Walter D. Mignolo’s term that is often cited as such. I embrace the phrase “decolonial imperative” in citation of Roberto Hernández’s *Coloniality of the US/Mexico Border: Power, Violence, and the Decolonial Imperative*; Hernández argues that decoloniality and decolonial projects are a set of ethical and political obligations to each other and the planet itself, one which recognizes the interdependence of all things; embodies a spirit of generosity and reciprocity in one another; and ultimately the “seeking of a horizon that attempts to evade the very structuring logic itself,” the logic in question being the coloniality of power (190).

Within LCR, decoloniality is an ongoing project, beginning in 2008 with Damián Baca’s *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*. Baca’s project at that time was multifaceted, seeking to establish within the field of LCR a decolonized conception of the history of rhetoric and writing that centered on the writing systems and meaning-making practices of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, specifically pre-Columbian Mesoamerican scripts found, among other places, in what is now called the Southwestern United States. That is, rather than locating the origins of rhetoric and writing in ancient Greece, Baca moves that we consider the history of alphabetic systems and rhetorical practices of the Americas.

Baca’s groundbreaking study additionally aims to introduce a pedagogical model which will serve the composition classrooms of the Southwestern United States, and beyond, where the upcoming majority of undergraduate-aged people are racialized as Latinx. I understand this study as a continuation of Baca’s undertaking and its subsequent extensions, taking my point of departure as one key observation from his introduction for *Mestiz@ Scripts*. Noting that the consideration of Latinx students in the disciplinary history of English Composition (LCR) had begun relatively late, Baca explains that “Mestiz@s appear only recently as unnamed linguistic ‘problems’ in remedial or standard first-year writing seminars” (xv). My study, then, takes Baca’s observation of Latinx students as an occasion to consider the “politics of remediation” (Soliday) from a decolonial perspective.

BASIC WRITING HISTORY

At the beginning of this section, I find it important to note that the study at hand is essentially a reconsideration of previously considered subjects, albeit through a slightly different lens. While the connection between race and remediation in LCR studies is well documented and established, it is my contention that a decolonial lens may provide a slightly finer cut to questions of remediation, particularly the epistemologies in place that position different groups of students and literate practices within, outside of, and on the margins of the university. This is to say that while the politics

of remediation do indeed have a racial bent, as documented by Steve Lamos, Carmen Kynard, and others, echoes of coloniality remain unexamined in the a priori assumptions structuring theories of academic literacy and home literacy. Additionally, while scholars of Latinx writing studies have pointed to demographic shifts in student populations as the exigence to consider concepts of Latinx inclusion and identity within LCR studies, what Romeo García and José Cortez have termed the “biopolitical argument,” such arguments have yet to account for a previous shift in student demographics and its influence on the developing epistemic frameworks of LCR studies, namely the “counterhegemonic struggles waged around access to higher education” (Parks 13, 20), which brought us both open admissions policies and the creation of Ethnic Studies programs, including Chicana/o Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Latinx and Latin American Studies programs, and so on. Thus, from my perspective as a theorist and scholar of the historiography of Basic Writing as a knowledge-producing enterprise, I argue that the decolonial research paradigm offers several helpful analytical tools to make sense of our current moment.

While histories (revisionist and otherwise) of Basic Writing research have typically focused on Black English Vernacular and its attending literate practices as the excluded other of academic language and literacy, a quick look at the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* establishes that the linguistic practices of students we would now call Latinx have been construed as an object of study since its inception. In a manner consistent with Baca’s comments on the history of Latinx students in composition studies, we observe that the first issue of *JBW* contains an article about Spanish language interference in Basic Writing courses, focusing on the influx of Spanish speaking students into the CUNY systems following the 1968 protests and the resulting Open Admissions policies, and taking a primarily linguistic perspective, identifying common errors caused by Spanish language interference and offering a few best practices for the BW instructors of the day to support students in correcting said errors. While the piece is typical for BW scholarship of the time, there is a particular aspect of its argument that has a certain valence in the present as well, especially in its larger context in the journal’s inaugural issue.

This “deficit model” of language pedagogy was thoroughly critiqued at the time and has been problematized even more thoroughly in the decades since, but the question remains as to what extent the epistemic assumptions involved have continued to frame Basic Writing scholarship’s epistemic frames, and whether we can see the influence of the Great Divide theory of literacy at work in the intellectual history of Basic Writing.

THE GREAT DIVIDE THEORY OF LITERACY

For a review of the Great Divide theory of literacy and an exploration of its valence for LCR studies, we turn to the introduction essay to a recent special issue of this journal, Antonio Byrd, Jordan Hayes, and Nicole Turnipseed’s consideration of the legacy of Brian Street. In “Against Autonomous Literacies,” Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed consider how Street’s theoretical innovations on the nature of literacy as a social practice continue to inform our current theoretical debates, and particularly how the “autonomous model” of literacy has in some ways come to reassert itself in some contexts.

The stakes of Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed's study for our present purposes are twofold: first, that they serve as an example of another effort to interrogate the epistemic assumptions underpinning how literacy is understood in LCR studies, and secondly that Byrd and co-authors draw out an explicit critique of "colonialism" that Street himself understood as central to his intellectual project.

Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed note that "Street's critique of powerful actors' deployment of self-serving constructions of literacy is consistent at points with the commitments of anti-racist and decolonial scholarship," going on to "briefly draw connections between Street's early writing and contemporary decolonial work that seeks to parse the relationships between literacy, writing, and dominant modes of power" (XI). In particular, they cite Gabriela Rios to establish that "the spread of Western literacy (as alphabetic writing and European languages) was bound by a missionary, *colonial* agenda that constructed alphabetic literacy as a sign of 'true' civilization . . . that persists into the present day," essentially noting that Street's own epistemic project was directly concerned with what we might now call "the coloniality of power" and its relation to the dominant epistemologies of literacy, academic or otherwise (Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed XII).

Among other things, what Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed accomplish for LCR studies in their introduction is an exigence to consider decolonial projects in the epistemology of literacy, particularly in the context of how we might consider and reconsider Brian Street and the New Literacy Studies in the present. Pausing for a moment to consider parallel conversations, we see similar objectives for Baca, Iris Ruiz, and others pursuing decolonial projects in terms of Latinx writing and rhetoric studies, in some cases citing from the same texts or working through the same decolonial research paradigms. Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed make this observation as well, noting that Street's work "resonates with elements of current scholarship that have come to be central to contemporary literacy studies, such as Ruiz's entry on "Race" in *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*, in which she argues for a decolonial methodology that can "delink the term race from its historical ties to Western hierarchies" (5).

In this case, what remains is to show how the currents of scholarship we have identified within Latinx writing studies and literacy studies in LCR studies today connect to ongoing debates about the "politics of remediation," extending ongoing decolonizing work in the study of literacy and its epistemologies to Basic Writing scholarship. To begin, we will briefly reconsider the assumptions at play in the early Basic Writing scholarship concerning "Spanish language" and "non-standard dialect" related language interference.

Historiographies of Basic Writing have often remarked that early BW scholars and especially administrators and (mostly literature) faculty of the time left their own biases about "correct" and "standard" writing mostly unexamined, resulting in an early version of what we now know as the "deficit model." Thus, both writers in the early issue of *JBW* position "academic writing," which they say is "coherent and free of errors," at the center of their theory of writing and literacy, attributing errors to the "nonstandard dialects" of both English and Spanish. It is important at this point to briefly note the stakes of how "non-standard dialects" are constructed, and how these stakes relate to the question of how Western systems of alphabetic literacy manifest within ideas of "'true' civilization," as Rios puts it (63). Perhaps not ironically, English and Spanish are the primary languages of colonial

societies in the Americas, and historically the “correct” or “civilized” versions of those languages are those that relate most closely to England or Spain themselves as metropolitan colonial powers, with various “pidgin” or creolized versions of English or Spanish associated with colonies and colonial populations. Standard American English itself has even come to be regarded as something of a global standard for communication, which historical linguistics have noted as co-occurring with United States global hegemony from the mid-twentieth century onward.

Looking at this larger historical context enables us to see how the idea of “correct” or “standard” version of languages or literacies, rather than being a description of existing literacy or language practices (those common to United States universities in this case), is in fact an ongoing political project that depends on the existence of non-standard or minoritized Others as its condition of possibility. This is to say that, in lockstep with how “standard” English and Spanish come into being as part of the larger systems of colonial domination presided over by English and Spanish speaking empires, “correct” academic literacies come into existence out of contact between twentieth century academic institutions and students from minoritized groups, particularly Black and Puerto Rican students in the case of the City University of New York. This hypothesis, were it to be true, would cast the shadow of coloniality over Basic Writing as an enterprise, and necessitate a decolonial project within the developmental courses and coursework of the present. This, indeed, is the contention of my current study: that colonial ideas of literacy frame the central research question of Basic Writing, and that decolonizing work in LCR studies writ large that fails to consider the role of remediation and developmental courses in creating and maintaining the university’s regimes of “academic literacy” will ultimately fail in that many of the very same students that decolonial pedagogies intend to serve will remain barred from entry to decolonized mainstream composition classrooms by way of having been kept at “the gate below the gate,” as Ira Shor put it at the turn of the century.

The stakes of a decolonizing project within the epistemologies of literacy at play in Basic Writing scholarship entail a reconsideration of Basic Writing’s position within the institutional cultures of higher learning, as well as, and possibly most importantly, its role within LCR studies as a disciplinary formation, the Composition Studies aspect in particular. The historiography of Basic Writing thus far has understood it to be a sub-field of Composition Studies that primarily concerns itself with remediation, specifically in the guise of an additional course (often named Basic Writing) or other institutional resources and imperatives intended to remediate or correct deficits in the literate practices of incoming students, often students who are minoritized, first generation, or non-normative in other ways. This way of thinking, as Matthew Pavesich and others have pointed out, has essentially created a double bind for Basic Writing scholars insofar as we simultaneously find ourselves questioning and rejecting the rationale for Basic Writing’s existence and fighting back against institutional or political efforts to dismantle it, on the grounds that Basic Writing and related programs are the primary means via which these students are able to access higher education (Pavesich).

I argue that this scenario is the outcome of a dynamic in which minoritized students, following waves of protests and direct action emanating from the social movements of the mid-twentieth century, have been conditionally granted access to United States higher education, the condition

being the institutionalization of the “deficit model” within Basic Writing and Composition Studies as a whole, particularly in terms of how we have taken up the concept of literacy. That literacy has additionally occupied a central role in decolonial scholarship outside of LCR studies is no accident; indeed I argue that literacy as a means of dividing cultures and individuals into those defined by their possession of literacy versus those defined by its absence—the Great Divide theory of literacy,—can be productively read as the intellectual architecture for the “deficit model” in Basic Writing. While the deficit model has been questioned and in some ways moved beyond in Basic Writing scholarship, it remains institutionalized in the larger cultures and systems of United States higher education, with the inevitable result that the “deficit model” becomes the larger context within which Basic Writing coursework takes place, creating a seemingly insurmountable contradiction for Basic Writing teachers and advocates. Scholarship in LCR studies concerning decoloniality and literacy, however, offers a way forward from these contradictions, as evidenced below.

DECOLONIALITY AND LITERACY

In “Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics,” Gabriela Raquel Ríos takes a decolonial and community-based approach to examining the literate and rhetorical practices of farm worker activists in Central Florida, noting that these activists, many of whom are Latin@ or Mexican@ (I use the author’s terminology out of respect for their work), deploy rhetorics that respond to “ideologies of literacy have been used to construct them ” (the workers themselves) as “a-rhetorical” (Ríos 68). For Ríos, the stakes of her study are to establish an understanding of how the farm worker activists have built a “theory of social change” through what she terms “land-based literacies and rhetorics,” as opposed to literacies and rhetorics that take alphabetic text as their primary basis or means of elocution (Ríos 68).

I call attention to Ríos’s study for two primary purposes. First, I find her analysis of the ideologies of literacy that construct the farm worker activists as “a-rhetorical” instructive for how we might conceive of the ideologies of literacy framing Basic Writing, and additionally because I find her analysis of the differences between the “historical trajectory” of what she terms “Latin American Indigenous Studies” as opposed to “rhetoric and composition studies,” which in this study I have termed LCR studies (63), to be especially trenchant. Ríos goes on to note that Indigenous philosophies, those that she associates with Latin American Indigenous Studies, trouble the dichotomies that pervade rhetorical theory, such as “environment/human/mind” and “subject/object,” using the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their practice of “teatro” as an example of a rhetorical performance that moves beyond the oral-literate binary that Ríos takes as having framed the ideologies of literacy at play in LCR studies (65–66). Further, Ríos cites performance theorist Diana Taylor as arguing that “the colonial construction of an oral-literate binary that has plagued much of literacy studies can be understood more accurately as an archive/repertoire binary” in which embodied and land-based knowledges and literacies are defined by their deficit relative to print based texts and archives (Ríos 65).

Of concern here for my study is how Rios draws out the colonial binaries framing the ideologies of literacy in composition studies, how they arise from the colonial encounter with the minoritized Other, nevertheless assigning an important role to such others as the farm worker activists and other Latinx or Indigenous people and communities, a position Cortez and García name elsewhere as the “sovereign exclusion” of Western writing systems. This system of dichotomies, I argue, frames the distinction between academic and “home literacies,” as well as the distinction between academic literacies and community literacies. Further, I argue that we might more productively collapse the distinction, noting that literacies we might otherwise name as community literacies become “home literacies” in the case that members of minoritized communities matriculate into institutions of higher learning, an area for further inquiry. Rios then lends an important analytic to our consideration of Basic Writing insofar as she makes explicit the connection between colonial paradigms of knowledge production and the ideologies of literacy active within LCR studies, following Amy Wan in noting that the association of literacy with citizenship within said disciplinary formation occludes the “contradictoriness of literacy as a tool for empowerment” due to its “uncritical uptake of citizenship production” (Rios 68). When we consider these observations in the context of Basic Writing, we see that the deficit model that frames the epistemology and ideology of literacy within that institutional project is an emanation of the same “colonial binaries” that construct the CIW activists as “a-rhetorical” (Rios 60).

For another instance of how colonial structures frame the deficit models which inhere to many literacy theories and pedagogies, we consider Michael T. MacDonald’s “‘My Little English’: A Case Study of Decolonial Perspectives on Discourse in an After-School Program for Refugee Youth,” which reflects on the author’s experience teaching in the named after-school program. MacDonald’s study develops Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship, reading literacy sponsorship via Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s observation that literacy “has been a primary medium of imperial rationality” and functioned as an “artificial measure of development” which works against the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and the valuation of Indigenous ways of knowing (MacDonald 17).

In the case of the refugee students who MacDonald tutored in the aforementioned after-school program, he identifies them as at risk of being “constructed according to colonial discourse” due to the prevailing imperialist view of literacy underpinning the ideas guiding the program and programs like it. That is, the African refugee students who MacDonald surveyed for his study, in a way that they themselves point out in his anecdotes, find ways to make use of the English language that counter or circumvent the ideologies of literacy which would “construct them as a-rhetorical,” as Rios puts it in her study in reference to the CIW workers in central Florida (60). I refer to MacDonald’s study primarily to note a similarity between his argument and that of Rios, namely that in both cases we see a minoritized or multiply marginalized group responding to ideologies of literacy that have produced them as a-rhetorical, illiterate, incapable of abstract or hypotactic thought, and so on. The ideologies of literacy in question are chiefly produced and maintained by academic institutions, and to an extent the (primarily research-focused, if also concerned with pedagogy) objectives of both Rios and MacDonald are in some way to make those institutions more responsive to these groups of people, engage them on more ethical or reciprocal terms, or at the very least understand their

own colonial biases. To loop back to the central objective of this study, I again reiterate the point that the same colonial models of literacy underpinning both literacy sponsorship in McDonald's study and academic ideologies of literacy in Ríos's article form the basis of the deficit model that pervades the intellectual architecture of Basic Writing studies, which has historically functioned as both guarantor of access to higher education by students from minoritized groups and internal checkpoint regulating and standardizing their rhetorical and literate practices, moving them from an "a-rhetorical" or "little English" stage to what we might call "college readiness."

Additionally, in both studies examined in this section, we see the adoption of a decolonial approach to research projects that primarily center on literacies and rhetorics which take place outside of the boundaries of the university, even as they work counter to the university's ideology of literacy. To continue our study of the decolonial imperative in Basic Writing, we now turn to a survey of recent decolonial moves *within* the university's ideologies and epistemologies of literacy.

DECOLONIALITY AND PEDAGOGY

Thus far, the ongoing engagement with decoloniality in LCR studies, the decolonial research paradigm in particular, has been organized around three texts: Damián Baca's *Mestiz@ Scripts*, *Digital Migrations and the Territories of Writing*, Baca and Victor Villanueva's edited collection *Rhetorics of the Americas*, and Iris D. Ruiz and Raul Sanchez's edited collection *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*. While an exhaustive account of the work contained in the above listed texts is outside the scope of this study, it is necessary to briefly take stock of their larger goals, which are twofold. First, all three books take it as a central objective to excavate the logics of coloniality underpinning LCR studies. Second, the books seek to gesture toward a decolonial turn within LCR studies that looks to Indigenous, Latinx, and otherwise marginalized knowledges and ways of meaning making as productive resources for LCR studies. Thus, the decolonial move within LCR studies is both critical and affirmative, interested in both uncovering and negating one framework for theorizing writing theory and pedagogy and generating new paradigms and practices for LCR studies as a disciplinary formation.

Thus far, my study has focused a critical lens on the basic assumptions of Basic Writing, one formation located within LCR studies, arguing that it is the means via which LCR studies institutionalizes the "deficit model" and locates "basic writers" at the periphery of the institutional geographies of post-secondary writing pedagogy. In the section that follows, I endeavor to extend the work of the scholars mentioned above, noting that their studies are, perhaps not in error, concerned with LCR theory and pedagogy overall as a disciplinary formation, as opposed to specific sub-sets of theories and pedagogies that relate to different spaces within United States higher education's "geographies of writing" (Grego and Thompson). My claim, then, is that extending the ongoing decolonial trajectory within LCR studies requires a consideration of how coloniality is directly implicated within said institutional geographies. LCR's decolonial turn, then, must directly engage questions of remediation and literacy at the post-secondary level.

As referenced earlier, Damián Baca begins his *Mestiz@ Scripts* with the observation that *Mestiz@*

students appear “only recently” in English Composition (author’s term), specifically as “unnamed linguistic ‘problems’ in remedial or standard first-year writing seminars” (xv). In my reading, Baca accomplishes two moves with this observation. First, he notes that the students he names *Mestiz@* are primarily positioned within LCR studies in terms of their supposed deficits relative to their proficiency with written English, and second that LCR studies has been primarily concerned with *Mestiz@* students in terms of their capacity (or not) to pass through First Year Writing, the mechanism by which institutions of higher learning mediate the boundary (or border) between “home/”community/ minoritized literacies and literate practices as opposed to their own, what has been termed “academic literacy” (Baca).

Baca’s intervention, then, is to regard these students and their home communities, rather than as sources or markers of problems or deficits, as subjects who carry with them valuable resources for knowledge creation and rhetorical/literacy inquiry. His proposed means for this pursuit, as he reveals in the following chapters, is to rewrite the histories and historiographies of LCR studies so that they begin in the Americas, viewing the history of writing in the Western Hemisphere as beginning there with Indigenous meaning making systems, as opposed to beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans. This is to say that Baca frames his intervention (a reconsideration of the history of rhetoric and writing in the Americas) as an alternative to and direct critique of what we have previously termed the Great Divide theory of literacy, a theory that he engages rather explicitly throughout *Mestiz@ Scripts*, noting that prevailing notions of literacy have been focused on a linear teleology suggesting that “all writing systems progress towards the letter” and that “alphabetic literacy is the pinnacle of all other systems of recorded knowledge” (Baca 7). Baca’s move to call attention to a temporal aspect of the colonial “Great Divide” view of literacy, one in which all systems of recorded knowledge and meaning making ultimately terminate in alphabetic literacy, is especially important for our analysis insofar as it provides a useful theoretical lens for thinking about Basic Writing and the politics of remediation.

To some extent, all university pedagogy, LCR studies included, does depend on a linear and teleological conception of learning, insofar as we assume that students will begin from a certain level of understanding and progress through different, presumably higher levels of understanding as they approach graduation. We also assume that students, at the university level especially, are exiting adolescence and entering adulthood, and we often base our view of pedagogy on the cultural assumptions we hold concerning the attributes and attitudes of people in this stage of life. This is all to say that in some ways, we might not necessarily object to an ideal of pedagogy which takes as a given that students will, at the end of a course, course sequence, or degree program, arrive at a similar understanding. In the case of LCR studies, to some extent our own *raison d’être* is predicated on this construction, and while problematizing or critically reconsidering this disposition may be worthwhile, this question is outside the scope of the present study..

It is not my aim, then, to question our goal of helping students acquire and use certain literate and rhetorical practices, but rather to consider how Baca’s observations on the temporal nature of the Great Divide theory of literacy can be a helpful analytic for thinking about the larger ideologies and epistemologies of literacy underpinning Basic Writing and the politics of remediation. Baca

notes at the outset of his study that Mestiz@ students arrive in LCR studies as “unnamed linguistic ‘problems;” astutely observing that throughout much of the history of LCR as a disciplinary formation such students are considered as an object of study due to their need for linguistic remediation, and how the “deficit model” of pedagogy arises from the university’s contact with these students (in the guise of open admissions and related programs). To some extent, as Kelly Ritter, Mary Soliday, and others have noted, the initial purpose of English Composition was itself remedial, and additional layers of remediation also existed prior to the formation of Basic Writing as a knowledge-producing disciplinary project. The difference, as noted explicitly by Victor Villanueva and others, is that Basic Writing arises in response to an influx of minoritized students, as a consequence of intentional activist struggles for access to United States higher education.

Baca’s temporal perspective, then, is helpful for our purposes insofar as it enables us to see that the deficit model, which places a student’s acquisition of “academic literacy” as its ultimate goal, maps onto colonial “Great Divide” theories of literacy that construct the literate and rhetorical practices of non-Western cultures as backward, primitive, of the past, and unable to construct meaning. An additional resource that Baca, Ruiz, Steven Alvarez, and other contemporaries lend to our analysis is the way in which their decolonial critique of the “Great Divide” theory of literacy both develops and troubles the dichotomy between autonomous and ideological models of literacy. The key distinction, one I alluded to at the outset of my study and will repeat here, is the distinction between autonomous vs ideological models of literacy as a question of theoretical or epistemic error versus the distinction between decolonial and Great Divide conceptions of literacy as a question with political and ethical valence far beyond the strictly academic notion of error. As an example, we would consider Gabriela Ríos’s study of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their practice of “teatro” as a gesture of advocacy for the workers and their communities as an observation that their literate and rhetorical practices have been misunderstood by academics.

This precise shift, the move from a value-neutral or objective assessment of the epistemic errors in writing pedagogy and assessment to a values-based and politically charged intervention on behalf of minoritized students and communities, is the shift that animates my proposal for the exploration of decolonial imperatives and projects within the field of Basic Writing studies, for two key reasons I will explore in the space remaining. First and foremost, the decolonial lens, Ríos’s study of the CIW for example, connects questions of Basic Writing and the politics of remediation to larger political struggles and questions across and beyond higher education. In public scholarship and debate, discussion of the politics of remediation in university level writing instruction has been a rather arcane subject in recent years, reaching its peak as an object of public concern in the 1990s. Issues of representation, equity, and access in higher education, however, are hugely contentious and ongoing in the present climate. Thus, a connection between Basic Writing and decolonial struggles and activism will open a space for teachers of Basic Writing and advocates for access and equity within LCR studies more broadly to link our efforts to larger and more visible public debates.

The second benefit, which I have sketched in some detail and earlier pages and will reiterate in my conclusion, is that attention to the politics of remediation within the decolonial turn underway in LCR studies will both broaden and deepen that project’s engagement with questions of literacy,

pedagogy, and the influence of coloniality on the higher education's geographies of writing. To be explicit, I suggest that decolonial studies in LCR consider Basic Writing to be itself a means of policing the borders of academic and minoritized literate practices, rather than a race-neutral or value-neutral institutional system. To take my argument a step further, I would repeat my suggestion that a decolonial project within LCR studies that does not take into account the extent to which Basic Writing has already served a sorting function in response to the university's contact with minoritized students and communities will ultimately reify the same structures it seeks to undo, by failing to grapple with the ways in which remediation has positioned particular students within higher education's geographies of writing.

DECOLONIZING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF BASIC WRITING

To begin our discussion of the benefits a decolonial lens could bring to Basic Writing scholarship and its ideologies of literacy, we will turn to the Studio model of writing pedagogy, a project relevant to our purposes for two reasons. First, Studio, as noted by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson in a number of venues including the monograph *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, arose as an institutional response to revanchist attacks on developmental writing courses in the state of South Carolina, in particular a piece of legislation that banned remediation in any of the state's publicly funded four-year institutions. Thus, Studio scholarship is particularly well suited as a resource for any politicized view of Basic Writing insofar as it takes its own political and public context into account as its own condition of possibility. Second, the Studio model of pedagogy, out of all the models that have arisen in response to the sustained attack on Basic Writing and other "high risk" programs (see Lamos) from the 1980s onward, is the model that most explicitly engages the question of how students are positioned at the margins and borders of university pedagogy by virtue of their supposedly deficient or aberrant literate practices.

In their consideration of how academic structures position "remedial" students at their borders, Thompson and Grego continue the spatial turn in LCR studies centered around Nedra Reynolds' *Geographies of Writing*, in which Reynolds takes up Edward Soja's theory of postmodern geographies as a means of making sense of the material and place-based aspects of writing in the context of higher education. Before we move further into Thompson and Grego's argument, it is important here to note the emphasis on spatial and geographic concerns in decolonial theory, both within and outside of LCR studies. Baca's *Mestiz@ Scripts* dedicates an entire section to Spatialization, wherein Baca argues for a focus on the geographies of literacy, writing, and rhetoric. Specifically, Baca seeks to trouble a hierarchical and teleological conception of writing and rhetoric that terminates in European alphabetic writing systems, a conception which implicitly marks all other symbolic systems and practices as deficient or unfinished. For Baca and others, considering the spatial aspects of literacy and rhetoric theory and pedagogy displaces a temporal focus that marks non-Western literacies and rhetorics as somehow less literate or rhetorical than their counterparts. Recalling our earlier reading of Rios on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and MacDonald on refugee students in a literacy program, we see spatial terms in play as well, especially in the guise of how colonial

ideologies of literacy police the boundaries between academic/home literate practices as well as academic/community literate practices. Thus, my claim here is that the spatial logics of coloniality and the ways in which they inhere to academic ideologies of literacy, particularly those which animate the politics of remediation.

In *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, Thompson and Grego are explicit in their discussion of how “social and institutional histories” mediate access to knowledge creation, noting that “at the upper undergraduate and graduate levels” of the “idealized university,” “knowledge is admitted to be an ‘open system’ in which the relationships between researchers and subjects and the relative rawness of data are issues for discussion and debate” (99). This is to say that, at the “higher levels” of the university’s institutional hierarchy, knowledge is increasingly understood as rhetorical, constructed, or produced. In turn, students present at these levels (advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and so on) are presented with knowledge along these terms. Conversely for Thompson and Grego, students who “enter the university at lower levels,” along with students who are “associated with those of a race, gender, or class more typically found at such levels,” encounter coursework which “pare down skills to the basics,” such as Basic Writing. These courses end up positioning student writers “further from discussion of those institutional rhetorical contexts that have influenced their writing development and continue to influence their writing choices”.

Consequently, Thompson and Grego suggest that “it as though our higher education institutional hierarchy can admit that the boundaries of internal and external pentadic analyses of life are less than clear in front of only the most advanced student-participants,” nothing in parentheses that these student-participants are “by then winnowed down and homogenized” (Thompson 99). At the risk of stating the obvious, one of the primary means of “winnowing down and homogenizing” students in United States higher education is general education writing courses, Basic Writing especially. To draw out Thompson and Grego’s implication, we can recall how colonial ideologies of literacy, for Gabriela Ríos, Damián Baca, etc. divide people and communities into a-rhetorical or il-literate, marginalizing rhetorical or literate practices other than Western alphabetic literacy into the margins of “academic literacy.” If we understand Basic Writing to be a primary means of filtering students in terms of their “basic skills,” a “gate below the gate” as Ira Shor put it, we can see that the traditional Basic Writing curriculum indeed serves a colonial function as a border or “checkpoint” within higher education’s geographies of writing.

There is, however, an additional layer of complication to the debate about Basic Writing. Similar critiques to that sketched above have appeared in Basic Writing scholarship since at least the 1980s, and yet the original paradigm of Basic Writing has continued to exist in many ways, and many of its strongest critiques have cautioned against its abolition.

The reason for this contradiction will be familiar to most Basic Writing instructors and advocates, but it still must be made explicit. Namely, Basic Writing is, in many cases, the primary institutional mechanism that continues to serve as a guarantor for access to higher education on the part of minoritized students and communities at all, especially after more explicit programs intended for this purpose (what Steve Lamos has termed high risk programs) have been dismantled, outlawed, attacked, or at the very least severely defunded. Thus, to eliminate Basic Writing and other

developmental programs is often to bar the students those programs are intended to serve from accessing higher education at all. Indeed, it is this occasion that gave rise to Studio pedagogies in the first instance, insofar as they were developed as a means of supporting “underprepared students” while remaining compliant with legislation in the state of South Carolina which banned remedial coursework.

While Studio pedagogies, Stretch, and other new and alternative systems of Basic Writing pedagogy, as well as traditional Basic Writing courses, can and do support students in the development of their own literate and rhetorical practices, they are also united in how they all carry an important flaw: they cannot independently resolve the contradictions which animate their own existence. These contradictions create the simultaneous imperative both to support Basic Writing in practice and critique it in theory (what Matthew Pavesich terms “the liberal reflex”), and to attempt to promote access and inclusion within a larger social project that defines itself in many ways in terms of selectiveness and exclusion, namely United States higher education. These contradictions, I claim, can be overcome, among other means, via a turn to a decolonial imperative within Basic Writing scholarship and pedagogical praxis.

CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZING BASIC WRITING

I began this exercise considering an aporia between the extant literature on Basic Writing pedagogy and the decolonial turn in Rhetoric and Composition studies, noting that these intellectual projects have come to occupy the same grounds, consider the same questions, and particularly raise critical questions about the status minoritized global majority students in the United States university system. These are, of course, the students who have been present in United States higher education since the desegregation projects of the mid-twentieth century, those of the global majority, many of whom are indeed Indigenous to this continent. Thus, the basic set of questions considered by early Basic Writing scholars (how best to serve students which the university system and at times a hostile dominant society regarded as forced upon United States higher education externally as an outcome of political struggles) found themselves taken up later on by decolonial scholars.

Initially, I regarded this “gap in the literature” as a thought problem to be taken up by Rhetoric and Composition scholars, but at the present juncture I have come to view it as the inevitable conclusion of real material conditions being investigated and interrogated by scholars working from different intellectual positions and carrying different assumptions. Therefore, the aporia in question is not actually a gap in the literature, but the specter of real political struggles reflecting themselves downstream within our discipline’s scholarly production. Thus, the knowledge problem I posed cannot in fact be resolved within my own scholarly practice, rather its conclusion will come as the outcome of struggles outside the realm of pure thought.

As I worked on this study, a newly invigorated and energetic Palestine solidarity struggle has erupted across United States college campuses, one that finds the student activists of the present locked in conflict not only with university administrators but also with external actors and organizations and in some cases the state itself. Perhaps paradoxically, a wide range of institutions that canonize

and valorize the student protest struggles of their pasts have roundly condemned this year's protests, and some campuses began to call in state security forces to quell them, violating decades-old taboos. At the center of this struggle are questions of the meaning and value of speech, literate practices, and rhetorical performances, particularly in terms of how they are implicated in or resist colonial domination and other systems of power. The state, in concert with a wide range of non-state actors, has in the last instance assumed the power to dictate the boundaries of legitimate speech by its own fiat. In this context, the line between legitimate protest and unacceptable incitement to violence finds itself imposed externally by university administrators, thus generating a Great Divide in discourses of Palestine which reproduces the fundamental boundary of colonization itself. In this context, we can see clearly a bipartite division of literacy practices, slogans, and terms which reifies the Great Divide theory of literacy and calls to memory Fanon's teaching that the colony is "a world divided."

As such, the status of colonial power as a means of apprehending modern political struggles is now hotly contested. I view this not as history repeating itself, but rather an ongoing power struggle at the heart of modernity rising to the fever pitch necessary to be visible within our scholarly communities. Decolonization itself as a concept has come under attack, linked by right wing actors to terrorism, prejudice, and calls for violence. This struggle has been conceptualized as new, emergent, or unprecedented, when in fact it is the continuation of the conflicts inaugurated in the 1960s' "counterhegemonic struggles waged around access to higher education" to which Stephen Parks attributes the rise of our discipline, which remains the case whether or not our discipline takes heed (13, 20). What does this mean for a turn to a decolonial imperative within Basic Writing and a turn to the politics of remediation within decolonial scholarship?

My own students have been candid in their disappointment with how many faculty members who openly celebrate 1968-era student occupations have been silent about or even hostile to the student protests of today. It is easy to characterize this as hypocrisy, a lack of familiarity with the real history, or simply cowardice. I argue, however, that this would be a mischaracterization of this rhetorical dynamic. In my view, the cause of this apparent contradiction is the ways in which student protest of the past have been historicized and commemorated: primarily in terms of how their effects benefitted institutions themselves, Basic Writing programs, Composition Studies, and English studies more broadly. Thus, the history of the student struggles of the past has been written from the perspective of the university professionals who benefitted most thoroughly from them, a far cry from the anti-colonial motivations of the 1960s-era students themselves and the larger movements they constituted. Carmen Kynard has roundly criticized this dynamic as a discourse of "white innocence" in Basic Writing studies, which I choose to read as an elision, on the part of Basic Writing scholarship, of its own complicity in coloniality.

It is here that Basic Writing scholars seeking to grapple with the aporias between Basic Writing scholarship and the emergent discourse on decoloniality in LCR studies should look, the critical reappraisal of our own historiography and the ways in which histories of Basic Writing, SEEK, open admissions, and remediation have been rhetorically produced in ways that ultimately benefit our own professional ethos and elide the real dynamics of power and hierarchy underpinning the entire intellectual enterprise of LCR studies. In the years following 1990s and 2000s attacks on remediation

writ large and Basic Writing programs and courses in particular, I argue that Basic Writing scholars have fallen into a melancholic disposition which harkens back to an imagined past of comparatively well-funded Basic Writing programs and courses, in tandem with their ostensible social benefits.

However, a critical reappraisal of this trend has begun within Basic Writing studies as well. Tessa Brown's "Let the People Rap: Cultural Rhetorics Pedagogy and Practices Under CUNY's Open Admissions, 1968–1978," revisits the historical connections between the history of Open Admissions and the rise of hip hop culture and literate practices, arguing that racist backlash against Open Admissions and SEEK was itself generative of counter-hegemonic literate practices in Black and Puerto Rican communities in New York City, removing Basic Writing historiography from a triumphant teleological narrative that centers the professional success of White Basic Writing scholars and placing it back into the history of twentieth century counter-hegemonic social movements (Brown 2019). Sean Molloy and Alexis Bennett follow Brown in reconsidering Basic Writing's historiography, noting that defenses of existing Basic Writing courses and programs have largely performed a rhetoric of "white innocence," at bottom centering the professional ethos and continued success of White BW faculty and scholars at the expense of a more thorough analysis of the underlying divisions and hierarchies structuring higher education's geographies of literacy (2022). A turn to decoloniality, especially its relation to the social movements so closely linked to the history of Basic Writing, will supplement this important work and continue the work of revising LCR's history such that it can serve as a resource for the challenges confronting the field at present.

Given that Basic Writing programs were ultimately the result of external political struggles, and in many ways constituted a compromise which retained colonial logics in the university system which have found themselves under pressure in various ways since, it is there that we should focus our attention. Thus, the decolonial turn in LCR studies certainly does offer a robust set of theoretical resources and perspectives for invigorating the core questions at the heart of Basic Writing studies, albeit not when distilled from their broader political valence.

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GenAI: The Impetus for Linguistic Justice Once and For All

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AN EXPERIMENT

On its website, the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing asks, "Where is the GenAI for Black English?"¹ As writing center tutors and writing instructors whose research interests reside in linguistic justice pedagogies, we wondered the same thing. We knew that Black English (BE) has been framed as a "distorted dialect [of] minstrel-show performers," (McWhorter 21), as a "mutant" of old and middle English (Smith), and as "ghetto" (Baker-Bell; Kirkland). We also knew that generative AI tools were known for problematic and racist "behaviors" (Holmes-Iverson). With these issues in mind, we decided to experiment with using ChatGPT, a generative AI platform where you input a prompt and it generates, or outputs, a response. We asked ChatGPT to generate a recipe in BE. A copy of its output, unedited, appears in Figure 1.

Granny's Soulful Mac and Cheese

1. First, ya preheat ya oven to 350°F (175°C). Den, grease up a 9x13 inch bakin' dish.
2. Cook yo' macaroni accordin' ta da package directions. Drain it up and set it aside.
3. In a big ol' pot, melt yo' butter ova medium heat. Once melted, sprinkle in da flour and stir it 'round good. Let it cook fo' 'bout a minute, stirrin' so it don't get all clumpy.
4. Slowly pour in da milk, stirrin' it up until it's all smooth. Keep cookin' and stirrin' 'til it starts ta thicken up nice and creamy.
5. Season it up wit' salt, black pepper, cayenne pepper, and nutmeg. Give it a good stir.
6. Add in da shredded cheddar cheese, mozzarella cheese, and Parmesan cheese, stirrin' it up 'til it's all melted and creamy like.
7. Toss in yo' cooked macaroni and stir it up 'til da pasta's all coated up wit' da cheesy sauce.
8. Pour dat cheesy goodness into yo' greased bakin' dish, spreadin' it out nice and even.
9. Sprinkle da crushed Ritz crackers all ova da top.
10. Slide dat dish up in da oven and let it bake fo' 'bout 25–30 minutes, 'til it's all bubbly and golden brown on top.
11. When it's done, take it out da oven and let it cool down a lil' bit before servin' up dem soulful scoops of mac and cheese. Enjoy!

Fig. 1. A Mac and Cheese Recipe Created by ChatGPT Writing in BE.

Now, ignoring the fact that ChatGPT chose to make this recipe a "Soulful Mac and Cheese," doesn't this read like the racist stereotype of Chef from *South Park*? It sounds like someone making fun of BE more than it does someone speaking it, demonstrating the stereotypes that frame GenAI's

understanding of BE, and is reminiscent of racist minstrel shows.

Our experiment demonstrates that even when asked expressly not to do so, ChatGPT reflects “Western, male-dominated, white,² middle class understanding and expectations” (Sharma) about

“We argue that the rise of GenAI necessitates a reimagining of academic writing conventions to place students—and their voices—at the center through the lens of linguistic justice.”

language use, ideologies, and the people who practice languages outside of white mainstream English. Graham Stowe explains that the algorithm can only reflect its creators and the dominant hegemonic linguistic systems and hierarchy embedded in our society today. This suggests that even when we attempt to counter ChatGPT’s inclination towards white mainstream English³ (Lester 23; Stowe; “Linguistic Justice”), racial biases towards marginalized language

users are still present. Essentially, “the technology excludes the possibility for . . . dialects to be incorporated into the meaning-making process” (“Linguistic Justice”), thereby limiting the ability of students who speak a non-standardized English to have meaningful linguistic representation in GenAI.

Our experiment is not the only one to demonstrate this racial bias for white mainstream English. According to Jeremy Hsu, researchers at the Allen Institute for AI input text written in Black English and white mainstream English and asked ChatGPT to characterize the authors of the text. They used ChatGPT-4, a model that supposedly has undergone antiracist “training” for its outputs. Despite this training, authors of inputs using Black English were characterized as “suspicious,” “aggressive,” “loud,” “rude,” and “ignorant,” demonstrating negative stereotypes associated with Black English (Hsu). When the researchers also asked the AI to match the speakers of Black English and white mainstream English with specific jobs, Black English authors’ inputs were associated with unemployment, jobs not requiring university degrees, or music and entertainment (Hsu). The Allen Institute for AI completed other experiments that further demonstrated the depths of generative AI’s racism even after antiracist training.

Nevertheless, because academic writing conventions primarily favor white mainstream English, multilingual and multidialectal students may be more compelled to turn to AI for their papers in order to approximate such academic writing conventions without fully understanding AI’s adherence to white language supremacy. It is for these reasons that we as writing educators must respond to this particular moment, which necessitates a re-examination of academic writing that enacts linguistic justice.

A KAIROTIC MOMENT

GenAI, and largely the fear of it for some, has swept colleges across the country. Kalley Huang explains how many professors are turning to in-class writing, hand-written essays, use of browsers that monitor student activity, or extensive explanations of revisions in an effort to avoid student plagiarism through AI. Some faculty, according to a report in the *New York Times*, might even be foregoing essays in general (Huang). On the other hand, many professors are finding ways to include

GenAI in the classroom, even so much as requiring it. Both alarmist and inclusive approaches demonstrate that all stakeholders are scratching their heads to find the most effective responses to GenAI in ways that address learning objectives, the epistemological nature of writing, and student agency. A rehaul of the academic writing conventions as they have been traditionally practiced is the only way towards both enacting linguistic justice and continuing to value writing's role in student meaning-making. Dani Lester argues that:

[I]f there is a potential advantage to GenAI's proficiency and adherence to white mainstream American English (and its deleterious effect on voice and language), it's that GenAI has made material and visible the otherwise slippery linguistic slope toward white patriarchy. This problem creates an opportunity to implement more innovative and radical practices to address systemic injustice, building off current practices regarding technology literacy and encouraging ownership. (23)

As graduate students, writing center tutors, and educators committed to linguistic justice, we do not hope for more sophisticated AI tools that attempt to mimic non-standardized English varieties as Julia Nee, Genevieve Macfarlane Smith, Alicia Sheares, and Ishita Rustagi (4) argue for but, rather, for academic writing conventions to reprioritize the use of style, rhetorical choices, and the integration of one's own lived experiences. We argue that GenAI users seeking to make AI more linguistically diverse are not working towards linguistic justice but possibly reifying harmful languaging stereotypes. GenAI, in fact, cannot answer the call of linguistic justice precisely because it fails at language diversity; students' voices cannot be effectively and meaningfully mimicked. Understanding the racist nature of language generated by AI then, this moment compels us to call for a disruption of academic writing conventions that prioritize linguistic justice through writing tasks that value student voice more explicitly.

“GenAI cannot effectively answer the call for linguistic justice precisely because it fails at language diversity; students’ voices cannot be effectively and meaningfully mimicked by AI.”

LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

Linguistic justice refers to the dismantling of oppressive language ideologies and white linguistic supremacy, according to April Baker-Bell (7). It explicitly centers BE and the experiences of BE users. Pawlowski theorizes several tenets of linguistic justice:

1. There's no such as Standard Written English to begin with, and it is actually white English (Greenfield).
2. Code-meshing, not code-switching, should be the norm in academic spaces (Young).
3. All of this is a matter of
 - a. justice (Baker-Bell),
 - b. wellbeing (Green), and
 - c. life or death (Inoue).⁴

Centering writers' voice in writing instruction has been suggested as a strategy in pursuit of linguistic justice for users of BE (Thompson as well as all multilingual students (Proctor, Silverman, and Jones). By voice, we refer to language usage, the inclusion of lived experiences, and rhetorical choices as determined by the writer. Much academic writing within college contexts dismisses the subjectivity of the writer, while also implicitly or explicitly requiring white mainstream English. In some extreme cases, these conventions have turned academic writing into a dehumanized and disembodied process and mode, (and perhaps AI generated writing is a manifestation of this dehumanized and disembodied writing). A reimagined approach to writing "places the writer at the center . . . valu[ing] the writer's imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development" (Burnham and Powell 113). These approaches to writing value students holistically and reinforce the notion understand that we cannot separate a student from their writing, just as students cannot separate abstract concepts in their classrooms from their own lived experiences and realities. In this way, teachers can enact bell hooks's call for "engaged pedagogy" that "sees [students] as whole beings with complex lives and experiences" instead of just "compartmentalized bits of knowledge" (15). By faculty more explicitly inviting the student voice into students' academic writing, students can enact more agency over their own languaging and rhetorical choices as well as humanize their writing through the inclusion of their own subjectivity. Additionally, valuing student language practices and their wholeness within student writing might, in many ways, mitigate student impulses to use GenAI for their writing assignments and aspires to pursue linguistic justice.

Below, we offer our thoughts as writing center professionals and writing instructors attempting to center linguistic justice principles in our writing classrooms during this GenAI era.

Practitioner Reflection: (Faith)

In my experiences teaching first-year composition, teaching and emphasizing writerly voice served two purposes. First, in terms of linguistic justice, I wrestled every day with how best to meet the needs of my majority English-learning multilingual classroom as a white, monolingual English-speaking woman who is often understood to be using standardized English. There was tension between my values of not teaching them assimilationist standardized English, but still teaching them the English they needed to be successful in their subsequent classes. This was not a fear of some imaginative grammar nazi professor teaching my students, but rather me coming to terms with the reality of my role in a college ecosystem—my class is designed to prepare them for other classes. I turned to voice as a way to navigate this.

I taught my students that their writing comes from them, that their identity is intrinsically tied to their writing, and that their writing can and should sound like them. In particular, I honed in on word choice and vocabulary. I banished the thesaurus—no more digging for big words—and I introduced code meshing. Is Spanish the best way to say this idea? Then say it in Spanish and explain the connection in English. I taught them to think about audience and purpose when writing, and whether they wanted to use vernacular to communicate with this audience and for what purpose. We learned about tone, how to sound less casual while maintaining one's own style. Focusing on voice allowed me to teach the skills of writing and rhetoric, not just prescriptivist formulas and

grammatical rules.

A second purpose voice served in my class was to get to know my students and their writing. With over 50 students in my first-year composition course, and a dense curriculum to get through in 15 short weeks, the main way I got to know my students was through their writing. My class started with a personal narrative allowing me to get a sense of my students' styles and voices. By the third essay, I could tell my students' writing apart. Bianca,⁵ for example, was a former translator whose writing always sounded very technical, and José was passionate for his topic and tended to be very conversational in his style. I learned a lot about the personalities of my students and how to best work with them through their writing.

This purpose was twofold. Getting to know my students' voice also means I know when something is written in that voice. Early in my teaching career, I had a conversation with another teacher about a student whom she suspected had plagiarized late in the semester. She suspected the plagiarism because he'd been writing for her all semester and it "didn't sound like him." In other words, his voice and style were not present in this essay. This would prove to be my litmus test in my classroom as well. When student writing didn't "sound like" the student I'd gotten to know, I approached them to discuss how they wrote the paper. Of course, it wasn't plagiarism every time. However, my emphasis on voice allowed me to both catch and address plagiarism when it did happen and to intervene when students were using strategies that erased their unique voices.

In my experience, GenAI is the easiest non-student voice to catch. It simply cannot mimic authentic voice and reads robotically. It isn't capable of code-meshing like my students are. It isn't capable of expressing tone or finding that passion for the topic José had. If we're concerned about plagiarism, perhaps allowing students to foster and develop their own unique, authentic voice and style is a way forward.

Practitioner Reflection: (Lauren)

Being a white educator in a first-year composition classroom at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), I experience the complexities and tensions of cultivating linguistic justice at a time when student GenAI is common. Every semester, I include a unit on critical language awareness (CLA) in the standardized English 101 curriculum, with the aim of fostering more critical understandings of hegemonic language practices that reinforce white mainstream English and permeate academic writing. At the end of the unit, students produce a specific argument on language ideologies within educational contexts using the unit's texts and, if they prefer, their own lived experiences as support. Each semester, a majority of essays take some sort of critical stances that either demonstrate the many issues of standardized language practices, such as linguistic racism against Black English (Baker-Bell) or r. Sometimes student essays argue for validating and embracing marginalized languages in academic settings as explained by Vershawn Ashanti Young. Throughout the unit, students typically demonstrate an evolution from internalized dominant language ideologies, and sometimes internalized anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell), to more critical understandings, most exemplified in their final essays. In their final semester reflections, students overwhelmingly say that this unit resonated with, interested, and even surprised them the most.

But I understand and experience the many complexities and “perpetual ‘buts’” (Howell, Navickas, Shapiro, Shapiro, and Watson.) of engaging in linguistic justice as a white, monolingual speaker in an authoritative position over multilingual and multidialectal students of color. I have grappled to varying degrees with students making critical arguments around languaging, reflecting on their own uses of Englishes and other languages but seeming to want to attempt to maintain a standardized English form in their actual writing. Some scholars argue that translanguaging, or code-meshing, is a naturally occurring phenomena whether it appears visibly or invisibly in writing (Guerra); while others encourage the use of visible code-meshing in writing (Young). Instructors assessing student writing in hopes of seeing the manifestations of their teaching efforts run the risk of engaging in linguistic tourism, as Paul Kei Matsuda suggests, which flattens consistent and prevalent hierarchies around language varieties.

Further, encouraging students to visibly code-mesh in their writing creates a new form of multiculturalism that further dismisses the systemic and material impacts of language ideologies and ironically reinforces monolingual logic through difference, according to Bruce Horner and Sara P. Alvarez. It is for reasons such as this that some instructors reject any critical attention to trans/languaging altogether. Merely inviting students to translanguaging in their writing in a composition classroom is little help to the instructor who somehow assesses that writing. Expanding academic literacy to more explicitly prioritize student voice also runs the risk of tensions around authenticity and performance (Royster), particularly, in my case, for the white gaze resulting in reifying and centering whiteness through the guise of authentic voice that in many ways mirrors the stereotyped language of our initial experiment. Aspiring to enact linguistic justice within my own writing classroom has prompted me to reflect: How do assignment requirements intentionally or unintentionally demand white mainstream English? And what does it mean for a multilingual student to code-mesh in their writing, only to be assessed by a white, monolingual instructor?

While not all students use programs like ChatGPT, there does seem to be a general misunderstanding of many of my students in thinking that these bots can produce better writing than they can. And given the certain assignment descriptions I see as a graduate writing center tutor that put a high amount of weight on “style, grammar, and mechanics,” perhaps these students aren’t wrong. In my own teaching and tutoring experiences, I see the urgent need to embed linguistic justice into assignment prompts and rubrics, and to do so rather quickly as GenAI will only become increasingly more sophisticated and prevalent—and to what end? I value the language practices, lived experiences, values, and epistemologies of the human bodies that sit in my classroom. Why would I not then want to understand my students more through their own writing, particularly in a writing workshop course? It is because of my privileged position as a white, educated instructor whose language practices are valued in academia, not in spite of my positioning, that I wrestle with these tensions—perhaps failing repeatedly, but continuously trying to enact linguistic justice within my classroom. It is for these reasons that educators must return to the importance of student voice in writing as a pedagogy of linguistic justice during these GenAI-saturated times.

COMPLICATIONS AND COMPLEXITIES

As stated in our reflections, not suggesting a stronger focus on voice through a linguistic justice approach is not without its complications and nuances. Given that most academic writing privileges white mainstream English, it is not surprising that multilingual and multidialectal students, who may already be academically disadvantaged, would be inclined to use it in their writing. At the same time, research indicates that such students are disproportionately penalized for using GenAI (Addy, Kang, and Laquintano, Dietrich 4; McDonald, Johri, Ali, and Hingle 17), especially in terms of accusations of plagiarism. Further, going by a rule of thumb such as “does it sound like the student” can be a harmful practice if based on assumptions of students’ language. This should never be a method used to penalize a student, but rather to open a conversation about concerns, and should only be utilized after several writing samples are collected.

Additionally, we understand that encouraging more representation of student voice within academic writing also is complicated. In some cases, as mentioned in Author 2’s reflection, students are asked to perform authenticity and then assessed by an instructor whether or not they performed it accurately (Royster). Rather than framing these tensions of GenAI usage in opposition to our argument, we see them as the exigence. That is, that academic writing conventions that reject or dismiss student voice, making it easier for students to feel compelled to use GenAI, further reveal the need to realize linguistic justice in writing contexts. If we want to humanize our students and help them make meaningful connections from their classes to their worlds, we must re-examine academic writing conventions to finally adopt a linguistic justice framework through valuing student language practices and lived experiences.

CONCLUSION

We share our stories here to encourage reflection on what the goal of writing instruction can and should be in a world with constantly evolving technology-assisted writing practices. We hope we’ve offered some insight into the importance of centering student voice and style; it is our belief that responses to GenAI in writing classrooms should prioritize principles of linguistic justice.

In this offering, we also wish to acknowledge our privilege as white women. We do not ourselves experience the linguistic racism that many people of color and BE speakers do. In our roles as writing tutors and instructors, we are positioned as academic gatekeepers of white mainstream English, something Asao B. Inoue argues is inherent in American academic writing education even as one may attempt to disrupt it (25). This positioning, however, has allowed us to witness the marginalization that linguistic racism perpetuates on BE language users, as well as on speakers and writers of other marginalized and racialized dialects of English, in the college writing classroom. We recognize that as writing educators, we need to be vigilant and constant in our unlearning of a bias towards white mainstream English.

For readers who would like to expand on this work, we suggest another thought experiment: ask ChatGPT to write a recipe in Spanglish, Appalachian English, Southern English, or any dialect of

your choice and consider the results with your students. Such experiments are not baseless activities, but can be enacted in workshops to, at the very least, position GenAI as what it is: the AI equivalent of a white, Western man. Given diverse student populations, this is an entry point into the necessary and larger conversation regarding a rehaul of academic writing conventions. We further suggest continued, critical research into the antiracist training of generative AI platforms like ChatGPT to hold them accountable for linguistic racism.

There are myriad ways for readers to center student voice and expression in their classrooms as a way to enact linguistic justice. A. Suresh Canagarajah and Thir Budhathoki each encourage the creation of writing assignments that allow students to draw on their own knowledge and

“In what ways can we as educators enact linguistic justice within our own classrooms, syllabi, and writing assignments? How can we teach the benefits and limitations of GenAI that also realizes linguistic justice? How can a focus on style and voice in the college writing classroom alter students’ reliance on and relationship with generative AI writing?”

background; for example literacy narratives or autobiographies are recognized as “motivating, accessible, and authentic for their students” (Budhathoki 46). Literacy narratives are an opportunity for translanguaging, in which academic literacy is seen beyond the bounds of white mainstream English language norms. Translanguaging, Budhathoki argues, is not just limited to second language learners or multilingual writers, but can be inclusive of US domestic English

monolingual students who speak marginalized dialects. We can also offer students more low-stakes assignments (Canagarajah) as they continue to practice navigating academic writing conventions while developing their writing voice, and students should be exposed to a range of diverse texts that disrupt white mainstream English writing conventions (Seltzer).

Ultimately, much more research and theorizing is needed to fully understand how generative AI could be a catalyst for more linguistically just college writing education. A question arising from our work that scholars might explore is *how can a focus on style and voice in the college writing classroom alter students’ reliance on and relationship with generative AI writing?*

NOTES

¹ We have chosen to use the term Black English (BE) to refer to what is also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American Language (AAL). While different scholars have different reasons for the terminology selected, we are choosing this term to validate BE as a variety of English while also recognizing that there is ongoing debate regarding whether it is a dialect or language. We also wish to emphasize that BE varies across context and speakers and is not just a single “dialect.”

² In this paper, we will be capitalizing Black but not white in recognition of the nature of race as a social construct rather than a fact. Black, however, represents not just race but also culture and community (Dumas). This capitalization is also standard Associated Press practice (Bauder).

³ White mainstream English is used to refer to the dialect of English also known as standardized American English. We use this term to emphasize the racial nature of dialects in the US context and in the tradition of scholars like Baker-Bell.

⁴ See Pawloski.

⁵ We have used pseudonyms for all students.

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Book Review—*Alone with Each Other: Literature and Literacy Intertwined* by Eli Goldblatt

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In my sometimes-murky role as a writing program administrator, I often think about Eli Goldblatt's chapter "Lunch" in *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. Goldblatt posits the main job of a writing program administrator is to have lunch with as many people on campus as possible. His advice is simple. I tell myself it's a lesson I already know. Yet again and again, just as I begin to wonder if I should renew that WPA contract the next time, I run into someone new on campus, we discover all that we share in our hopes for our institution, we make a plan or two, and I remember I have Eli to thank.

This kind of move characterizes Goldblatt, both as a person and as a writer and scholar. His personability leads, distracting us from the fact that he is also a profound thinker whose writing models what we value most in composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies: it gently sets aside our concerns with form—genre form, forms of difference, disciplinary forms—and helps us commune, instead, through practice.

For that reason, we are lucky now to have Goldblatt's new book, *Alone with Each Other: Literature and Literacy Intertwined*, a compilation of his published writing from the beginning of his career in rhetoric and composition to the present, between 1995 and 2022. Divided into three sections by topic—Composition Theory and Pedagogy, Community Literacy, and Poetics and Practice—the collection reveals, at last, just how much is really going on in Goldblatt's work when we see it in its wholeness.

In the excellent new introductory chapter, Goldblatt shows us how he's been thinking of his tripartite work all these years, straddling university writing programs and literature departments, community literacy settings, and the poetry community. Goldblatt loosens literacy and literature from their disciplinary forms and reframes them, so that "literacy" denotes reading and writing in the world, and "literature" means reading and writing for art's sake. Then he argues that this reframing allows us to make our way around and through their politicized institutional histories. While we in composition have often lamented our precarity and lesser status in relation to literary study, Goldblatt shows us how to respect our own grounding in our peculiar intersection of college writing, English literature, and English education.

But what Goldblatt also achieves—without stating as his aim—is a tender embrace of the varying stances, and dare I say open conflicts, within composition itself. He extols Aja Martinez's work drawing on Critical Race Theory, for instance, seeing a kindred spirit in the conviction that "argumentation divorced from accounts of lived experience too easily leaves oppressive structures in place" (7). He brings this newer critical work into conversation with the earlier energies of the social turn, especially the "often . . . misunderstood" work of David Bartholomae. Goldblatt writes that

we should remember Bartholomae for his “unapologetically . . . compassionate humanism,” which means reading all texts as closely as “literary” texts, because “language and literature are life-defining pursuits that matter for both individual and collective groups” (9). By putting these voices, and indeed, many of the voices across English studies, in conversation, Goldblatt shows how “Everyone in ‘English’ is telling a story or a counter-story or a counter-counterstory about language” (7).

The rest of the book unfolds the many ways that Goldblatt has developed this approach, taking us along through his life as a poet and in the poetry community, a Philadelphian, a partner in community literacy and organizing, a university faculty member and administrator, and a scholar of literacy. The book archives (if not comprehensively) Goldblatt’s considerable intellectual and artistic publications. The selections represent research of all sorts: classroom-based, community-based, and textual. Several examples of his poetry are remarkable in their own right, and add a glow to the expository genres.

Part I, *Composition Theory and Pedagogy*, includes Goldblatt’s interpretation of literacy sponsorship from his first book *Round My Way*, as well as a co-authored article on classroom discussion with literacy scholar (and Temple University colleague) Michael W. Smith. Two more articles draw from Goldblatt’s Jewish heritage. “Making *Charoset*: Teaching by Hand in the Shadow of MOOCS” draws from his life with the artist Wendy Osterweil and their shared theme of “teaching as an art done ‘by hand’” (67). He writes the essay in his mind as he chops apples and crushes walnuts for the Passover dish, substituting a discourse on Walter Benjamin in favor of a meditation on how writing classrooms are like family gatherings, how all life lived in person lets us be alive to the “presences contained momentarily within” (71). As we now contend with the world of AI, which takes us ever further from composing by hand, I am glad this beautifully composed essay—originally a blog post—is preserved in print.

Part II includes six important articles about Goldblatt’s extensive work in community literacy, at the heart of the book as it is at the heart of his life’s work. This collection demonstrates how central he has been to this movement within rhetoric and composition. The section begins with his entry “Community Literacy” written for *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, with the useful definition of community literacy as “a framework from which people with remarkably different outlooks, commitments, and backgrounds can come together to discuss, plan, execute, and assess actions that can make shared social spaces more vibrant and equitable” (103). His wisdom on working in community comes across in many stories about his work with incarcerated people and with the Temple University neighbors of North Philadelphia and small community organizations; he pairs it with extensive connection to the voices in the field of community literacy. This section is a great place to start for those looking to understand this community of scholar-activists, or to revisit it.

It is his writing on poetry, comprising part III, that was most revelatory to me, and that makes this collection most distinctive. Here he shows us how his thinking on literacy comes full circle through the writing of poetry. In “Imagining the Local: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and Community Literacy,” Goldblatt asks us to notice how the spare line of the modernist poet may be indistinguishable from the evocative expression of a child described in Shirley Brice Heath’s

Ways with Words. In doing so he walks us through his intellectual journey to settle in the study of community literacies, as he comes to realize how he is “seeking new instances of that search for the local” that Williams had seemingly brought to light (224–26). He quotes the poet Gary Snyder, who wrote that “the most radical thing we can do today is live in one place for the rest of our lives” (230). In “The Poetics of Remembering,” Goldblatt lays out his “poetics—a theory of making.” It is his “central task,” he writes, “to remember myself among others in each moment” (184).

The book also works as a history of the emergence and development of rhetoric and composition as a field, and for that reason would make great reading in graduate courses, including teaching practicum courses that include students in creative writing and literature degree programs. For the same reason, many of us who have been a part of the field for some time will find it of interest too. Goldblatt was around for the early days of rhet-comp; when he writes about formative figures like Deborah Brandt, Martin Nystand, David Bartholomae, and Linda Flower, he helps us come to know them as people. At the same time, he has been a champion of many emerging scholars in the generations since, bearing witness to important scholars of diverse identities who in turn bear witness to the full diversity of literacies and ways of knowing in their own work. Scholars like Steven Alvarez, Carmen Kynard, Iris Ruiz, and his own former students including Jessica Restaino and Meaghan Brewer, all figure as equals in his thinking.

That said, the story of the field that Goldblatt tells is told through the lens of his own commitments to community literacy and an ever-widening scope of knowing through the diversity of human experience. This collection is not a place to go if you are looking for the trajectory of work on movements like digital or multimodal literacies, new materialist approaches, or postcomposition. Nor does it offer much in formal research methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, that have been important for our work in curriculum and program administration. Goldblatt’s writing represents the best of the humanistic tradition in composition.

One could argue that Goldblatt’s core argument is one of place: how one is (and isn’t) at home; how literacies are always and only made of people in place; how abstract ideas grow from precise experiences in certain places, like graduate school, a community bookstore, or a kitchen of Passover preparations. Such place-based consciousness constitutes a familiar politics in composition. We know that where we come from is who we are, and we aim to teach and act in the world in ways that repair the inequities borne of place-based discrimination. Goldblatt is a profound teacher of this truth. But to me it is the *timeliness* of writing that he is really teaching us to understand. Poetry is not for “expressing” oneself, he insists (to the challenge of those who misunderstand the expressivist tradition). Neither is literacy about achievement. Both of these assumptions imagine a solid ground that can be stood on, once having written. Rather, it is the practice of unfolding with language that matters, he writes, “no matter what you compose” (264).

Whatever your knowledge of Goldblatt’s work (and if it’s minimal, get to know *Because We Live Here* and “Alinsky’s Reveille” as well), this collection is worth seeking out. Even those of us who know him well likely do not fully understand the significance of his work until we read this book. Like Monet’s many paintings of haystacks, Goldblatt’s project is not simply to record a single impression but, in the aggregate, to learn a new way of seeing that transcends what appears to be

an obvious material reality. His invitational approach and his admittedly “digressive argument” (181) leave endless openings for writers of all kinds of take up and keep going with his questions and commitments. This collection shows that how, as a scholar of literacies inside and outside of academia, Goldblatt is at the same time a poet and philosopher of language, and of our encounters with one another.

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