In Dialogue

The Future of Critical Studies in Literacy Research

Betina Hsieh
California State University, Long Beach

Tiffany M. Nyachae
Pennsylvania State University

Danielle Filipiak
University of Connecticut

David E. Kirkland
forwardED

Carol Brochin
University of Arizona

For the final In Dialogue of our editorial term, we wanted to invite some luminary voices in literacy studies to think together about the future of critical studies in literacy research. We asked Betina Hsieh, Danielle Filipiak, Tiffany Nyachae, David Kirkland, and Carol Brochin what they thought would push the field forward: What would or should literacy studies and English education look like in the future, including what collective priorities should be emphasized? We invited them to think together, to imagine what might be possible or necessary in a world that is on fire. In giving these scholars the "last word" of our editorial term, we are hoping that this effort toward intergenerational, collaborative knowledge building can be one of the seeds of hope that will help us grow toward a better future.

Betina Hsieh, California State University, Long Beach

The future of literacy studies and ELA must be: intentional, intersectional, critical, humanizing, and responsive. In an increasingly multimodal world where there is a constant flow of information that comes more quickly than our brains can process, we must be intentional in the work we do and in questioning the texts and information with which we are presented. As scholars of literacy and ELA, we must adopt critical intersectional lenses that move voices and perspectives that have traditionally been relegated to the margins into the center of our work, and do so in ways that acknowledge and affirm these experiences, building bridges for the better. We must push back against discourse from those who claim centering the voices of traditionally marginalized groups is divisive by instead advocating for the humanizing possibilities of being with, empathizing with, witnessing, processing, and understanding the fullness of the humanity of all people.

In order to do this work, we must continue to push the boundaries and bring in perspectives that challenge harmful stereotypes around various communities. This includes work that explicitly addresses anti-Blackness and patriarchal norms in language and literacy settings, including and beyond teacher education (Austin

& Hsieh, 2021); that moves beyond perpetual curricular violence and erasure engaged against Asian Americans (An, 2020; Goodwin, 2010; Hsieh & Kim, 2020) in literacy studies to present nuanced struggles with identity through language and literacies that Asian Americans engage in (Hsieh et al., 2020) as Americans; and that highlights beautiful resistant practices of communities, such as the work Shamari K. Reid has done on Black LGBTQ+ youth in ballroom culture (Reid, 2022). As Danielle Filipiak's contribution highlights, centering the joy, power, and agency of youth communities is critical to our collective futures, and much of the work that Tiffany Nyachae discusses around the fight for justice-oriented approaches to literacy instruction provides a pathway for us to move forward toward a different collective future.

In ELA and literacy studies, we have awesome possibilities of integrating dialogue and voices in a variety of ways that highlight stories which can heal us and bring forth community. We must build from these possibilities creatively and collectively. Those of us who work with future educators must also provide them with critical lenses and tools with which to navigate tensions (Hsieh, 2017; Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2022) in increasingly polarizing climates. If we do not do this, if we do not support teacher candidates, work with our youth, and engage ourselves in explicitly critical work, particularly around race, as David Kirkland notes in his contribution, it is likely nothing will change. Our work must be responsive. As new modalities emerge, as language, text, and interactions evolve, as societies change around us, we must respond to these shifts, always grounded in the principles of intentionality, intersectionality, criticality, and humanity, but also ready to move boldly forward toward a future we may not yet be able to imagine.

Danielle Filipiak, University of Connecticut

When I think about the future of literacy studies, I'm most drawn to the ethical and moral imperatives that our work has the potential to broker and the transformative possibilities that can grow out of collaborative literacy work and practice. At this historical pivot point, we find ourselves facing multiple global challenges: the proliferation of multiple forms of violence, the intensifying realities of climate change, growing mistrust and uncertainty. These crises, nourished by the amniotic fluid of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy, have rendered disproportionate violence and harm to communities of color while also sowing deep cultural, spiritual, and material alienation. What is our role then, as literacy scholars and practitioners, in fermenting imaginative processes and relations that enable alternative ways of being, doing, and knowing? How might we work communally to co-construct transformative visions that both see beyond and resist colonial logics designed to oppress and dispossess (Grande, 2018)? And what theoretical and pedagogical literacy frameworks are needed to guide us toward better ways of being together and caring for ourselves, one another, and this planet? As our ancestor Grace Boggs reminds us, societal transformation requires more than struggling against existing institutions; it also requires philosophical and spiritual leaps toward becoming more "human" human beings (Boggs & Boggs, 1974). To engage this stance, the future

of literacy studies must anchor itself firmly in decolonizing, abolitionist literacy pedagogies and research methodologies that are explicitly guided by an ethos of reciprocity, care, and humanization.

In service of such a vision, I imagine ELA pedagogies that intentionally hold space for the emotional, relational, and spiritual literacies of young people as they assert new visions of their futures across spaces, places, and modes (Filipiak & Caraballo, 2019). We will also need to engage critical, intersectional theorizing, like Betina Hsieh points to, that wholeheartedly centers the perspectives of intersectionally minoritized students whose voices, values, and experiences are often fetishized or rendered invisible in larger educational discourse. And we must become answerable to the communities we see ourselves serving within the field of literacy education (Patel, 2016; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019). In her contribution, Tiffany Nyachae powerfully asserts that literacy must be of use in the actual lives of students, specifically those of Black and Brown youth whose ingenuity and creativity have been historically disregarded and strategically stamped out. Toward this end, it will be important that we prioritize intergenerational, coalitional research (Filipiak et al., 2020) that actively works to call upon the wisdoms and brilliance of young people, their families, and their communities.

Forging a path forward, I find inspiration in work like Baker-Bell's antiracist Black language pedagogy (2020), Player's theorizing of critical self-celebration (2021), and González Ybarra's conceptualization of mujerista literacies (2020). Across their etchings, we are gifted with full, nuanced portraits of youth leveraging multiple literacies and identities to dream, resist, create, and assert themselves with brilliance and power to imagine the world anew, pointing us toward a future that resists neoliberalism and social injustice through joyful, critical, and hopeful expressions of care and desire. Moreover, their scholarship offers tangible examples of pedagogies and practices that sustain the livelihoods and humanity of young people right now, aligned with Carol Brochin's call for literacy educators and scholars to show up for youth in ways they might not have done in the past. Weaving together the constellation of literacy practices and pedagogies featured in these pieces, we are afforded a glimpse into not only what the future of literacy studies might be, but also the residue of moral courage and imagination needed for more just and equitable classrooms. My hope is that the North Star they offer our field in this moment will not be for nothing, that it will catalyze pedagogies and the ideological clarity we need to hold all students with the care and dignity that they deserve.

Tiffany M. Nyachae, The Pennsylvania State University

In a 2021 blog post for *Ethical ELA* (Nyachae, 2021b), I asked "What does literacy matter when we consider the material realities of our most structurally oppressed students?" The future of literacy will involve a reckoning with this question because literacy "must be of use in the actual lives of students from marginalized and historically oppressed groups" (Nyachae, 2021b). Like Betina Hsieh, I am specifically thinking about Black and Brown youth (as David Kirkland cautions

against generalist terms) and the field of literacy's responsibility to address the matrices of intersectional oppressions they experience. Furthermore, I take seriously Danielle Filipiak's call for attending to the ethical and moral imperatives of our work as literacy researchers, teachers, teacher educators, and coaches. Literacy in the future must liberate, decolonize, and reimagine the written word in all its mother tongues—and the multimodal word in all its variations—for the collective liberation of People of Color. In terms of multiliteracies, for instance, it is not only crucial for literacy to be responsive to our ever-changing world; literacies must empower students to *change* the world while also holding institutions, systems, and structures accountable for the oppression to which these students are subjected. In essence, "marginalized students must be able to show up as their full selves, articulate their realities, and examine how power, privilege, and oppression shape those realities while working for the good of themselves, others, and their communities" (Nyachae, 2019, p. 106). Thus, it is necessary for literacy to be used as a tool by which youth stand up and fight for what they believe in with the intention of creating a more just world (Haddix et al., 2015).

The power of literacy to transform lives has been widely documented (e.g., Christensen, 2000; Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Harris, 1992; Wilson, 2006), and yet literacy scholars are still fighting for justice-oriented approaches to literacy instruction (e.g., Muhammad, 2020; Nyachae, 2021a; Nyachae et al., 2019). To illustrate, drawing on the ancestral, elder, and youth knowledges of People of Color, *literacy futurisms* (Literacy Futurisms Collective-in-the-Making, 2021) is one framework that reenvisions and reclaims the future(s) of literacy. Underpinned by ancestral/collectivism (e.g., Campano et al., 2020), intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), play/imagination (Anzaldúa, 2015), and decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011), literacy futurisms is a way toward collective justice that "envision(s) multiple futures, presents, *and* pasts in which the literacies [and needs] of minoritized communities are centered" (Literacy Futurisms Collective-in-the-Making, 2021, p. 432). Still, as Carol Brochin argues, collective justice means thriving futures for queer, trans, and nonbinary Youth of Color too (Reid, 2022). I believe that the future of literacy, if it is to have any impact on the material realities of Students of Color, will consist of the practical application of literacy futurisms in literacy classrooms and other educational spaces. It is my hope that this framework (and others like it) will be vigorously taken up and expanded, and that we will not be making the same calls for justice in the field of literacy 50 years from now.

David E. Kirkland, forwardED

According to a recent study (*EPIC*, 2022), Black third graders and third graders from low-income homes in Michigan are more than twice as likely to be held back for being behind in reading. Across the United States, and increasingly across the globe, the story is the same: the problem of literacy is the problem of the color line.

As Tiffany Nyachae explains in her contribution to this piece, "The future of literacy will involve a reckoning." This reckoning must be about more than roman-

ticizing ideological positions that center academic dogma over the material realities of people. What is needed is a true reckoning that inspires an honest conversation about race (not culture) that gets to the root of race disparities across literacy education. But in literacy education, we either do not talk or do not know how to talk about race well because we do not know how to talk across our racial differences.

Scholars who do talk about race end up arguing over terms instead of advancing solutions to the race problem in literacy education. They end up talking in circles, missing each other or refusing to hear any voice outside their bubbles. There is such an avoidance to talk about race that, in some bubbles, language is stretched so broadly to create a polite vocabulary for discussing race that makes it almost impossible to discuss race. (What are "people of color" anyway?) And we have all read those studies that desire to transcend race or ethnic division or defy the "box" of racial categorization, that the systemic and structural barriers of racial vulnerability in our society have most certainly, and consistently, lessened their ability to establish anything meaningful that might push literacy research closer to resolving racial issues in literacy education.

In the years to come, I don't see very much changing: The conversation around literacy will continue to be dominated by a series of splintered voices—those who choose to focus on race and those who don't; those chiefly interested in the science of literacy, forsaking the science of human connection (Way et al., 2018); or those who have forsaken the science of reading and writing for a too-narrow focus on the politics of reading and writing. Unfortunately, the important conversations that must be had to move scholarship on literacy forward will not occur, and the pivotal work of racial equity that has demanded a scholarship of literacy more expansive and inclusive than what we presently have will remain solely political rather than scientific.

Indeed, our colleagues interested in questions of race equity could benefit from pivoting away from ideological extremes that make scientific inquiry impossible and closer to the types of textured insights gained from a more authentic scientific debate. Similarly, our colleagues who move to the other extreme, hiding behind the science of *this* or the science of *that* could benefit greatly from conversations that challenge them to deal with the complexities of race (cf. Kirkland, 2019, 2021).

Being heard is important. Being heard on one's own terms while creating space to hear others is intellectually empowering. It is my sense that the future of literacy research will benefit from open-minded civic dialogue, where participatory scientific structures are established as a matter of methodological best practice, not just to change systems but to change how people participate in changing the systems that most impact them.

If one goal in literacy research is really to move literacy education toward a racial reckoning, then people of all races must be empowered by our sciences, and the full acknowledgement of their power, voice, agency, and race must be expressed explicitly as a foundational tenet in the ethical practice of our research.

Carol Brochin, University of Arizona

When I imagine literacy studies and language arts classrooms in the future, I dream about queer, trans, and nonbinary youth telling stories and reading texts with peers and teachers where they feel a sense of belonging across their differences and communities. Like Muñoz (2009), I envision a queer future with educators who engage in transformative literacy practices that foster a deep commitment to social justice and a collective sense of care and understanding of all LGBTQ+ people, especially trans femmes of color. I dream of a future when there will be a collective shift from the individual *I* to a collective *we*. In this future, we all work in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian American, and immigrant communities and situate gender and sexuality studies beyond and across intersections and borders. In these dreams, we focus on the promises for transformation that this work offers rather than the problems and limitations often created out of fear and lack of information.

In the future, when scholars research and talk about LGBTQ+ youth, we will hear stories of resistance, transformation, and liberation instead of terrible statistics and studies that reproduce harm. We will be grounded in an understanding that LGBTQ+ students are in all our schools and classrooms, and that they do not exist as a monolithic group but rather come from all households, races, ethnicities, and social classes. Instead of centering how LGBTQ+ youth have higher rates of suicide and are more likely to drop out of school and run away from home, we will be flooded with stories about the ways they want to learn and thrive and make friends and fall in love and experience heartbreak and travel and work and dream and go to the movies. In this imagined future, trans and queer youth will have the "freedom to dream" (SOGI UBC, 2022), and their dreams will shape future possibilities.

I dream of a future in which all literacy educators have unlearned and relearned what we think we know about gender and sexuality. Together, educators will work on collective premises and understandings to ensure that LGBTQ+ identities are not up for debate in their classrooms. As educators, we will acknowledge that everyone brings their gendered identities to schools and classrooms. We will also work to recover ways of knowing and teaching that are sensitive, trauma-informed, compassionate, and empathetic.

At the present moment, the future of literacy studies is not as dreamy as I imagine it to be, and I do not believe we are prepared for what is coming. Currently, the rights of transgender and queer youth are at risk. At the start of 2023, over 360 pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation were introduced across the nation. To better understand this, I did a deep dive into the far right's attacks on transgender and queer youth (collegeofsbs, 2022). What I learned is that conservative organizations and political strategists set out to create mass hysteria at the expense of LGBTQ+ people and, especially, transgender youth. This might sound alarmist because it is. At the center is Christopher Rufo, the same person who led the attacks on critical race theory and has now decided that radical gender theory is being taught in schools. Understanding how these political moves are interconnected is critical

to our collective struggle. If we as literacy scholars and ELA educators do not connect the dots between anti-trans legislation, the science of reading movement, and the defunding of public schools, we will not recognize literacy and language arts classrooms in the future.

It is very clear from the national landscape that LGBTQ+ youth need us, not in an imagined future, but now. They need teacher educators and literacy scholars to show up for them in ways we have not done in the past. I imagine what would be possible if the field turned to queer literacy methodologies (Coleman et al., 2022) and trans pedagogies (Keenan, 2022) to address some of our most urgent needs and questions.

I want to imagine a future in which all cisgender people, especially literacy educators, have fought so hard for the rights of LGBTQ+ youth that these youth and their families no longer have to.

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Carol Brochin is an associate professor in teaching, learning, and sociocultural studies in the College of Education and the director of the Southern Arizona Writing Project. Her professional and scholarly work is rooted in her experiences as a public-school teacher and literacy educator along the U.S./Mexico border. Brochin's work is interdisciplinary, crossing and challenging disciplinary and theoretical borders while grounded in qualitative inquiry and literacy research methods. Her teaching and research push the boundaries of what it means to do equity work, both in literacy and bilingual education. Brochin researches and writes about teacher education, LGBTQ+ and bilingual literature for youth, and crossing borders through books.

Danielle Filipiak is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction and coordinator for the secondary English education program at the University of Connecticut. Her scholarly interests sit at the nexus of youth critical (including digital) literacies, sociocultural literacy studies, and practitioner and participatory research approaches. As a former English teacher and literacy coach who worked in Detroit and New York City schools for 15 years, she is committed to advancing

socially just, culturally sustaining literacy curricula and pedagogies that amplify the voices, brilliance, and ingenuity of youth from historically marginalized communities. Toward that end, much of her work has focused on intergenerational, youth-engaged research and activism and the multiple literacies and identities forged within such contexts.

Betina Hsieh is a professor of teacher education at California State University, Long Beach. Her scholarship and praxis are informed by 10 years of urban middle school classroom experience, K–12 literacy coaching, and work as codirector of the Bay Area Writing Project. Current research interests include Asian American teachers, identity-informed mentoring in teacher education, teacher and teacher educator identity, cross-content literacy practices and the 21st century literacy practices in schools and universities. At the heart of Dr. Hsieh's work is the exploration of how who we are shapes what we do (and the choices we make) as teachers and teacher educators. She is deeply committed to creating more equitable teaching and learning spaces for K-12 students and in teacher education.

David E. Kirkland is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of forwardED. He is a former secondary English teacher and high school administrator, who also served on the faculty of New York University for over 15 years as a professor of English and urban education, the inaugural Vice Dean for Equity, Belonging, and Community Action, and seven years as the executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools. Dr. Kirkland can be reached via email at: david@forward-ed.com.

Tiffany M. Nyachae is an assistant professor of education and women's, gender, and sexuality studies in the College of Education at the Pennsylvania State University. As a Black Feminist pedagogue and transdisciplinary, community-engaged scholar, her lived experiences and complicated historical connection to this land foreground her justice work in various contexts for the purposes of reimagining schools and overall social transformation. Specifically, Dr. Nyachae's research portfolio includes: (a) ethnographic and multiple case studies on supporting urban teachers committed to social justice through "race space" critical professional development; (b) design-based research studies of learning, learning environments, and literacy development in social justice literacy workshops for youth of Color; and (c) content and critical discourse analyses of extracurricular programs and curriculum for Black girls.