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INTRODUCTION TO THE HANDBOOK OF CRITICAL LITERACIES

The Current State of Critical Literacy Around the World

*Jessica Zacher Pandya, Raúl Alberto Mora, Jennifer Helen Alford,
Noah Asher Golden, and Roberto Santiago de Rook*

This is an expansive handbook on the past, present, and future of critical literacies on a transnational scale. Critical literacies, as they are classically conceived, offer people ways of interrogating texts and contexts and of writing and rewriting texts and realities to address injustices. They are, or ought to be, a key skill in any literate individual's repertoire of literacy practices (cf. Comber & Simpson, 2001; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2014; Vasquez, 2005). We define them in this Handbook as literate practices individuals need in order to survive and thrive in the world, foregrounding the concept that information and texts are never neutral; they afford the ability to produce powerful texts that address injustices in our lived worlds. This formulation is sometimes known by other names in the Global South, particularly in Latin America and Africa. As chapters in Area 2 of the Handbook will show, it can be seen in research on language acquisition, the teaching of literature and English language arts, Youth Participatory Action Research, environmental justice movements, and more. As the notion of "critical" has become increasingly commonplace, we as editors fear that, without reflexivity, the term has sometimes become too diluted or misconstrued to mean much at all, especially as terms like "critical thinking" become part of the neoliberal educational vocabulary. We are also concerned that the deeply contextualized meanings of critical literacy in different places and spaces around the globe may be lost even before coming to light. In the Handbook, we intentionally draw on multiple critical epistemologies, including European, Black, and Indigenous thinkers from the Global South and the Global North. At a time when post-truth paradigms influence the ways education is understood and enacted, and misinformation and disinformation increasingly shape unfolding events and evolving structures of power, critical literacies feel more relevant and crucial than ever.

Transnational issues of literacy are central to the resurgence of authoritarian forces and thus critical approaches have never been more important. As we write, we are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, whose ravages highlight the very inequalities and power arrangements that critical literacies research highlights. The pandemic's death toll is exacerbated by years of intensifying ethno-racialized notions of citizenship and nationhood across the world, which some among us see as resurgent fascisms. This has included strong anti-science discourses and right-wing populist support, all based on broad-based consumption of misinformation and disinformation (often called "fake news") spurred on by the architecture of and people's use of social media. Additionally, existential threats due to climate genocide and nuclear proliferation

are increasingly pressing, with significant repercussions for our biosocial and material worlds. Within education, we are also seeing increasingly narrow conceptualizations of literacy serving the interests of standardization, measurability, and accountability (Pandya, 2011) and a concomitant rise of edubusinesses that profit from literacy education. At the same time, the nature of texts and textual flows are rapidly transforming via media manipulation and the algorithms underlying digital platforms, altering the ways humans and nonhumans interact, produce, and consume knowledge, experience text(s), and experience racism (Benjamin, 2019; de Roock, 2021). If not for the everyday and collective resistance that is ongoing and necessary, such as the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, or the recent protests taking place across Latin America or Asia, to name two regions, for the past two years, it would be easy to feel that critical literacies educators are losing the battle.

In response to this complex confluence of change driving humanity toward homogenization in the name of control and profit, this Handbook provides a heterogeneity of current interpretations and applications of critical literacy by scholars from across the globe. We seek to demonstrate the diversity of uptake within critical literacy research communities; to strengthen our critical literacies praxis and international collaborations; and to present a stronger collective and heteroglossic front. We see a strong need for collaborations across borders and foresee the generative possibilities of such collaborations. As oppressive discourses, institutions, and forces are increasingly transnational, and as socioeconomic injustices grow and inequities widen, research and organizing that responds to oppression must also grow and diversify. We purposefully use the term “transnational” to signal our own perspectives on our places in the world and our own lived realities. Transnationalism as a term “came into existence at that moment in time when successful nation-state building ‘contributed to the creation of large numbers of people’ out of place—that is, crossing over the national boundaries erected in the last two centuries” (Roudometof, 2005, p. 119). Attention has shifted “from state and macro-actors to the micro-level of globalization and to civil society movements” (Duscha, Klein-Zimmer, Klemm, & Spiegel, 2018, p. 3) creating opportunities for refocusing the loci of voice and power. The Handbook is an attempt to capture disparate voices about critical literacy as a kind of collective civil movement.

This Handbook grew out of the Transnational Critical Literacies Network (TCLN), which was named to reflect our senses of being transnational academics and teachers, both in and out of place, and our awareness that our positionings allow us to decenter our own ways of knowing. As part of this commitment, we sought to highlight what counts as critical literacy work in diverse sociocultural contexts to counter the often-Eurocentric foundations of its academic lineage. In each of the chapters that follows, regardless of topic, area, or theme, we have asked authors to write about their social responsibilities as critical literacy researchers in this world. We decided early on that ideally no one person should write a chapter on their own, and that no one could write more than one. In the end, only three chapters are single-authored. Some authors knew each other before they began writing, while others were total strangers, connected through the TCLN and through their desire to write about this work. We took this approach to diversify the voices in these pages and to ensure that we had authors engaged in dialogue as they wrote. We have all reached far beyond our comfort zones to ask each other uncomfortable questions about whose voices should structure each section and how we should make decisions about inclusion and exclusion. One of our major preoccupations has been the languages we would use in this Handbook. We were not allowed to publish chapters in two languages—such as the authors’ preferred language and English—but as readers will see as they read the Handbook, we succeeded in arguing that many varieties of English were welcome. Readers will also encounter a wide variety within the structures we created; some authors chose to focus more on their home or adopted countries in a chapter on a geographic region, and some authors chose to focus on emerging instead of canonical work. Additionally, we have not required certain terms or acronyms (e.g., readers will see both “multilingual learner” and “emergent bilingual” in use in different places). The variation readers will encounter is intentional and reflects our vision for this Handbook as a space for diversity of experimentation, change, and intellectual rigor.

Form and Structure of the Handbook

As we hinted in the Preface, the Handbook is laid out in three Areas, allowing us to engage in three related projects mirrored in its areas: the antecedents and current state of critical literacies in Area 1; a global survey of critical literacy in praxis, examining work in 23 countries and geographical regions in Area 2; and finally, the chapters in Area 3 highlighting work that has pushed and continues to push the boundaries of critical literacies. We describe below some of the key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and areas of research in the three areas.

Area 1: Critical Literacies Over Time: Antecedents and Current Configurations

The first area addresses substantive definitions of critical literacies across fields and geographies, including historical surveys and deep theoretical dives. We have conceived of this first area as one about *time*; chapters describe and summarize critical literacy research over time in its different guises and subfields. Chapters also tackle critiques of critical literacy and questions about how it can be of use in neoliberal contexts and spaces. The authors of Chapter 1.2 experiment with the form and structure of the Handbook chapter. They begin by delving into critical literacy in action in three separate contexts, from the educational practices of a community of former guerilla members, through a “pedagogy of the earth” course in Brazil, to a U.S. grassroots teacher activist network. They trace connections between popular education—as Freire and others have described and enacted it—and our more current conceptions of critical literacies. What those authors do in poetry and prose, subsequent chapter authors take up more forthrightly, offering definitions of neoliberalism and ethnonationalism; English language teaching, bi/multilingualism, and translanguaging; youth, participatory, action, and research (as “YPAR”); embodiment, the disciplined body, the body as social text, the feeling/sensing body, the intra/acting body, and embodied literacies; identities, heteronormativity, practices of queering, and queering critical literacy; and critical media consumption and production.

The authors in Area 1 draw on a wide range of historical and current theoretical framings, as befits the wide scope of the Handbook. Readers will engage with sociocultural, poststructuralist, and post-humanist approaches. They will be reminded of the contributions of systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse analysis and be asked to take up queer perspectives on literacies, writing, and the world. Multiliteracies, participatory culture, and connected learning are also referenced in these chapters. Reading across the chapters is a reminder of how we as researchers and teacher educators draw on widely different traditions and theories to make sense of the critical literacies in which we engage to make sense of our worlds.

We asked authors to undertake reviews of and implications for research in their separate chapters. Reading across them shows the impact of neoliberal policies on literacy education, illuminating how such policies shape and exclude on a transnational scale (Chapter 1.3). It also shows us how children and youth can engage in critical literacies at all language levels, emphasizing the relevance of critical literacies to the lived realities of multilingual students (Chapter 1.4); we are reminded that critical literacy practices in the ELT classroom can facilitate language proficiency, motivation, and engagement, whether or not that is the original goal. Teachers are at the center of some chapters, where we see how teacher preparation contexts can be inimical to, or can foster, the uptake of critical literacy practices by teachers in preservice classes and their own classrooms (Chapter 1.6), and how teachers’ work facilitates critical literacies for English learners (Chapter 1.4).

We are reminded of the ways Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) privileges youth identities, epistemologies, and literacy practices, and of how YPAR challenges formal classroom learning methods and practices, as well as how it may transform the ways teachers are educated

(Chapter 1.5). These challenges are reiterated and viewed through the lens of embodiment in Chapter 1.7, where adult objectives for literacy learning are interrogated alongside youth's own perspectives and goals, and where authors see critical engagement in the exploration of youth's embodied literacy practice. We see how queering critical literacy entails the questioning of the representation of queer peoples' experiences, as well as questioning how we police (a)gender and (a)sexuality through our literacy practices (Chapter 1.8). We are asked to consider the role of writing in critical literacy education (Chapter 1.9). We are introduced to competing, overlapping, and contradictory approaches to media literacy, from critical digital literacies to critical computational literacies to pedagogies of invention (Chapter 1.10).

Area 2: Critical Literacies Across Space: A Global Survey of Critical Literacy Praxis

The second area addresses the question: What does critical literacy pedagogy look and sound like around the world? We conceived of this area as a collection of critical literacies praxis across *space*. We brought together surveys of critical literacy work that cover all continents, blending research on long-standing and recognized traditions together with research in regions with emergent or less recognized traditions. We were specifically interested in exploring what it means to engage in transnational critical literacy work (both country- and region-specific), especially teasing out the tensions involved in indexing these global concepts and theories in local contexts. Contributions contest any monolithic sense of critical literacy, pushing for a more expansive and transnational critical literacy project.

We were invested in highlighting countries or regions typically left out of discussions on critical literacy pedagogy, ultimately including both country- and region-specific surveys. The hope was to have all regions covered in some way. However, many regions are missing, not because there is not work being done there but due to a combination of limitations in our networks and lack of time for those we invited (especially given the COVID-19 pandemic). The term "critical literacy" also is far from universal, and even when similar work is being done, it more often than not goes by different names.

The scope and organization of this area was far from straightforward, especially given our commitment to remain sensitive to the histories, politics, and tensions embodied in geographical divisions. The process illustrates the ways textual practices are always political. Puerto Rico, for example, is a colony of the United States rather than an independent country, but we have chosen to list it with countries. Similarly, there was a question of whether Hong Kong should have its own chapter or be grouped with Taiwan, Macao, and Tibet under a greater China chapter. There was debate about how to approach the Caribbean, especially given the ways languages at play (Spanish, French, English, Dutch) come with distinct histories, flows, and debates. In the end, these chapters (Chapters 2.11, 2.17, and 2.18) coalesced through conversations with the authors, who were best positioned to stake claims, especially given what they felt capable and qualified to write about. We remain aware, however, that these are clearly political decisions, and that not all readers will be happy with them.

The configuration of the chapter authors was a broad palette. Some of the chapters included research teams that are working together to create a research body or make sense of it all within one institution (Australia [Chapter 2.2], Brazil [Chapter 2.3], Canada [Chapter 2.4], Colombia [Chapter 2.5], Indonesia [Chapter 2.7], Norway and France [Chapter 2.20], Russia [Chapter 2.12], Singapore [Chapter 2.13]) or across different institutions (Aotearoa New Zealand [Chapter 2.1], Mexico [Chapter 2.10], Nordic Countries [Chapter 2.19], South Africa [Chapter 2.14], United Kingdom [Chapter 2.15], United States [Chapter 2.16]). Some chapters mixed scholars situated both in the Global South and North, joined by a common topic (e.g., India [Chapter 2.6], Iran

[Chapter 2.8], Japan [Chapter 2.9], Puerto Rico [Chapter 2.11], South Asia [Chapter 2.21]). Some chapters bookended years of collaborative work, some chapters encompassed budding partnerships, and sometimes, serendipity brought the authors together (e.g., Uganda and Congo [Chapter 2.22]).

Some of the driving questions for the chapters in this section include: What forces are driving definitions and redefinitions of critical literacy? How is it thought about in different spaces? What local and global historical factors are reshaping definitions? What are the barriers to enacting critical literacy pedagogy in these countries? We suggested structuring chapters into six sections to identify major issues surrounding critical literacy on a global scale: (i.) An overview of the geographical space in its sociopolitical contexts; (ii.) An overview of the geographical space's educational system(s); (iii.) A survey of critical literacy work (including theory and pedagogy) by researchers and practitioners in the country, with some comparison to international work and lineage; (iv.) Visions for moving into more transnational and critical work from the perspective of that country; (v.) Conclusions/findings/suggestions for further research and practice; and (vi.) Implications for our social responsibility as academics.

This transnational work is ongoing, partial, and incomplete; we see it as a push for the field to both recognize and work for the expansion of critical literacies praxis. Covering every country or even region was a nearly impossible task and therefore this Handbook is not, in that sense, comprehensive. We see it as a conversation starter for our authors, readers, and the field. It represents an opening to look at emerging issues not only in these countries, but also on every continent. Whether addressing their country or region, contributing authors, made efforts to situate the conversations in their chapters as part of ongoing regional or continental issues that deserve more attention in years to come.

Area 3: Pushing the Boundaries: Critical Literacies in Motion

In the third area, authors set up a spirited agenda for critical literacies, pushing current boundaries with explicit calls to action for practitioners and researchers around extant and future critical literacy projects. The goal is to showcase critical literacy in motion. Chapters capture moving versions of critical literacies practice or invitations to connect critical literacy with emerging or under-explored bodies of thought and practice. Each chapter presents work that forges new territory in the field, reporting on varied contexts with a range of far-reaching implications. The projects they explore highlight the ongoing importance of the critical, as well as the unique and at times challenging directions in which contemporary practitioners and researchers are taking this work. This section is a collection of bold calls to continue the evolving relevance of critical literacy to today's complex education agenda and the broader social, cultural, political, economic, and material life in which we are always enmeshed.

We asked authors in Area 3 to invite us into their subfields by defining key concepts and acknowledging and contending with critiques of critical literacies in their domains. As for Areas 1 and 2, we wanted to know the implications of these approaches for our pedagogies, ongoing scholarship, and, perhaps most importantly, for our social responsibility as academics. The agenda that emerges from these chapters invites us to reflect on the limitations of past work in critical literacies as we forge new possibilities, and this rich agenda offers no single approach as we work to respond to conditions shaped by transnational and translocal concerns. The issues engaged through these critical literacy practices in motion are varied and many: chapter authors in Area 3 take up systems of domination grounded in anti-Blackness and other forms of racism; the unfolding climate crisis; the impacts of datafication; social hierarchies produced through deeply problematic exchanges and readings of linguistic capital; the unfurling loss of Indigenous languages; misrecognitions of people; deficit framings of identities; rising nationalisms and xenophobia; and textual practices that limit

our ability to form imaginaries that may engender possibilities for new social and material relations. These are indeed weighty concerns.

Critical literacy scholars have long resisted the notion of any single approach or methodology that could fix whatever might be seen in a given moment as the “literacy problem” a society or community is facing, recognizing decades ago that:

[L]iteracy refers to a malleable set of cultural practices shaped and reshaped by different—often competing and contending—social institutions, social classes, and cultural interests . . . how and when literacy became a problem had as much to do with economic, cultural, and social change as it did with anything that might go on in schools and classrooms.

(Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 2)

The more important question is what literacies can do to help create sites of possibility and transformation in the economic, cultural, and sociopolitical flows that delineate current affordances and limitations—flows that are increasingly transnational. Just as there is no single approach to fix a “literacy problem” in formal education, there is no one critical approach to textual analysis or multimodal production that has a monopoly on possible interruptions of the contemporary and future-oriented weighty concerns taken up in this area. Thankfully, the spirited agenda in **Area 3: Critical Literacies in Motion** offers multiple approaches to the enactment of critical literacies, all directed toward these contemporary and ongoing issues.

These approaches include analysis of contemporary literatures to question and make sense of “the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives” (Chapter 3.1) and the impact of our choices for textual analysis (Chapter 3.3). These approaches also include multimodal arts-based methods to access emotions and rich imaginaries (Chapter 3.2). Readers are invited to pay attention to emergent situated discourse in classrooms to cocreate moments of critical analysis (Chapter 3.13), and encouraged to view the decentering White and hegemonic gazes as a process as we engage in dialogue and activism in youth-led spaces (Chapter 3.14). Chapter authors detail approaches to navigating the beneath-the-screen, less visible software space and datafication to help people better understand new cultural and commercial relations (Chapter 3.5) and explore how everyday relations are shaped by digital media and technologies, positing ways critical digital literacies can broaden understandings of how language, literacy, and power are mediated in these contemporary digital ecologies (Chapter 3.8). Authors argue for the limitations of current frameworks as they entice readers to embrace posthuman and new materialist methodologies in an effort to encourage planetary literacies that offer new understandings of subjectivity—understandings may help to address the urgency of the unfolding climate crisis (Chapter 3.4). We are invited to open our work to “everything, everyone, every moment” as authors propose a politics of immediation for literacy studies (Chapter 3.12). Generative cross-fertilization of critical literacies with dis/ability studies are suggested as a means to disrupt global, ableist hegemonies as we readers are encouraged to center on the experiences of minoritized youth given special education disability labels (Chapter 3.6). Teacher education programs can develop new understandings of schools as embedded within community systems, and teacher educators are invited to see community members as partners in the work of supporting new literacy educators (Chapter 3.15). We see the possibilities in recent work on translanguaging in Additional Language Teaching (Chapter 3.9), and the ways critical literacies can further English Language Teaching (Chapter 3.11). We are invited into Indigenous youth’s use of social media to resist the loss of Indigenous languages (Chapter 3.10). To interrupt rising nationalisms, xenophobia, continuing colonialism, and social hierarchies grounded in racial identities, we are offered approaches to cosmopolitan critical literacies (Chapter 3.16), border literacies (Chapter 3.17), and abolitionist literacies (Chapter 3.7).

No single thread connects the theoretical frameworks, framings, and associated pedagogies and research programs present through the chapters of Area 3. There are chapters that resist the notion of “giving voice” to minoritized people, instead recognizing that people already have voices and seeking to affirm these voices by centering on these people’s knowledges and experiences (e.g., Chapters 3.7, 3.15). There are chapters proposing new theoretical frames, arguing contemporary frameworks cannot attend to the politics of affect (Chapter 3.12), environmental crises (Chapter 3.4), or digital ecosystems (Chapter 3.5). We read about new views of translanguaging (Chapter 3.9), ways to engage the critical in and through contemporary literatures (Chapter 3.1) and the arts (Chapter 3.2), and the need to see beyond our comfort zones while recognizing the current limitations of them (Chapter 3.3). This rich pastiche of approaches shows the current state of the field, and where critical literacies are going. Throughout, we, the readers, are invited to move beyond neoliberal academic production to engage, organize, disrupt, and build as we work for more sustainable social and material relations.

Conclusion

We, as editors, are awed, inspired, and bolstered by the chapters we have jointly collected, curated, and supported as they arrived in these pages. Our collective futures might involve the creation of websites, listservs, more handbooks, articles, and research studies; it might also include grassroots activism, or active engagement with teachers and students, or with policymakers and curriculum developers. In all cases, we will continue to question our own privilege, our own linguistic and cultural capital, and ask: Where are we going from here? We hope readers feel similarly, and are left with this thought: it is always time to do the work, and let’s do the work.

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