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Editors’ Introduction

Questioning Margins and Centers in Reading, Writing, and Research

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Issue 52.1 continues a long-standing commitment of *Research in the Teaching of English* to interrogating issues of identity and privilege in English teaching research, providing a space for voices that have historically been and continue to be marginalized within both schools and the academy. We feel that such pluralistic and anti-oppressive work is especially important in the contemporary moment, both in the United States and elsewhere, where we’ve seen a resurgence of racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and xenophobic attacks in the public sphere. Discrimination against the marginalized has once again been emboldened in perhaps even more violent ways. Accordingly, this issue’s articles call for a centering of various historically marginalized perspectives, a project we greatly sympathize with.

And yet, we see voices in this issue raising questions about what and who exists on the margins, and what it is that such work should do. Our lodestar here is a line of questioning engaged by Roderick Ferguson (2012), among others, in writing of the Black academic experience: Can one be both legible and liminal? Is it possible for those on the margins to make their work recognizable and also have it continue to represent what was vitally marginal about it?

We see this question as worth asking of the various marginal identity positions engaged with in this issue. For example, with respect to sexuality (in addition to race), we can ask Ferguson’s question of Latrise P. Johnson’s work on Black queer youth by borrowing from Love (2009) and other queer theorists who have considered in what ways “the closet” may actually be desirable for sustaining queer life and whether queerness should even seek inclusion within the norm. Like Ferguson, contributors Valerie Kinloch, Tanja Burkhard, and Carlotta Penn engage this question by interrogating the marginal(ized) literacy practices of Black youth which can only occur outside of the school center. Scholars of English education elsewhere have asked similar questions of students’ out-of-school literacy practices: Whitney (2011), for example, wonders if it may be “invasive, even violating, to bring into the classroom the literacies that students practice in the world outside of school... even when we have good reasons to do so” (p. 55). Cati V. de los Ríos and Kate Seltzer’s article takes up the question of liminality and legibility as it concerns
border thinking and translinguaging possibilities. The question of border thinking, too, helps authors of this article to consider again the formation of disciplinary boundaries. Lyons (2000) has articulated this colonial perspective with respect to disciplinarity, calling attention to the “settler colonialism” of disciplinary work used to create territories of knowledge that are valued. Disciplinarity works to articulate difference in a way that values some perspectives and scholarship over others and thereby sustains intellectual territorialism. Thus, asking Ferguson’s question of the treatment of creative writing in postsecondary institutions in Christine Bailey and Patrick Bizzaro’s article proves fruitful by engaging the liminality of aesthetic knowledge and modes of research outside of disciplinary boundaries. And finally, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum and Margaret Price engage this question with respect to ableism in qualitative research: What will it take to include marginal(ized) researchers with disabilities within the center of qualitative research?

Asking these and similar questions of marginal(ized) identity positions is not a critique of the value of those positions or their worthiness of being included/centered. Rather, it is a challenge to think about what may be lost of marginal positions’ singular energy when they become legible, normalized, and institutionalized within that center. In various ways, the articles in this issue both elicit and speak back to these questions as they work to consider how we might more equitably incorporate life at the margins within the realm of English research and education. We also see this as an opportunity to question how it is that the margins come to be created in the first place.

The issue opens with Johnson’s “Writing the Self: Black Queer Youth Challenge Heteronormative Ways of Being in an After-School Writing Club,” which explores the doubly marginal position of Black queer youth in White supremacist and heteronormative contexts as they write stories, poetry, and journal entries in order to “(re)claim, proclaim, and understand the self” (p. 23). For Johnson and the youth she studied, “writing the self involves a dialogic process of talking and writing about one’s life trajectory, personal identity, and lived experiences, as well as practices that support intellectual, academic, personal, and social engagement . . . challeng[ing] dominant narratives and heteronormative ways of being” (p. 29). We hear in this work echoes of Muhammad (2015) in the effort to document the power of writing to help students construct their identities in ways that resist the normative. This ethnographic case study follows three Black queer youth and their participation in an after-school writing club, Writing@West, finding that “the act of writing . . . enabled the participants to navigate and disrupt heteronormativity and traditional writing practices while being who/how they were” (p. 13). Importantly, for these youth, not only did writing acts result in affirming stories of self-identity that provided resistance to dominant narratives, but the personal and communal nature of the club also helped them identify as competent writers.

It should be noted that this after-school space study situated the possibility of writing as out-of-school and extracurricular; in that sense, Johnson’s findings still situate the hope of affirming and humanizing work done with writing in the liminal space at the end of the school day. Indeed, as Johnson notes, the impetus for
the formation of the Writing@West club and Johnson’s study of it depended upon the fact that the “participants had tenuous relationships with academic writing” (p. 23). The writing of Johnson’s youth subjects often shines with a singular and personal vibrancy rarely approached in students’ in-class written work. We wonder, too, following Love (2009) and Whitney (2011), if that vibrancy is (in part if not entirely) generated because of the extracurricular nature of the club. That is, we take the challenge of Johnson’s work to be to find ways of honoring and incorporating without assimilating Black and queer literacies into our classrooms. Further work is needed, then, to explore the possibility of identity construction through writing that resists the norm within the constraints of official curriculum and instruction.

Restorative literacies, Johnson suggests, may yet be able to counter the violence of heteronormativity in our schools.

Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn’s “When School Is Not Enough: Understanding the Lives and Literacies of Black Youth” also provides us with inspiring student counternarratives that add to the rich literature on Black families’ out-of-school literacies (e.g., Cushman, 1998, 1999; Fisher (now Winn), 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2003; Kirkland, 2013; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2015; Muhammad, 2015). Their narrative case study, working within the traditions of narrative inquiry and drawing on the construct of counternarrative from critical race theory, follows two Black male youth as they “used literacies to question . . . racialized narratives and their consequences, and to produce counternarratives to negative assumptions about Black adolescents” (p. 34). Such work is increasingly important as narratives of failure continue to circulate, “unfairly plac[ing] blame on Black youth” and other marginalized groups “and not on the structural inequalities endemic to US society” (p. 34). These youth used literacy to (a) interrogate racialized experiences and (b) produce counternarratives that emphasized “agency in negotiating structural forms of racism and inequity” (p. 39). The study found that schooling can lead “some Black adolescents [to] painfully internalize deficit narratives about who they are and what they cannot do”; however, when “schools partner with students, families, community organizations, and social service agencies, the importance of young people’s schooling experiences and the mutuality and bidirectionality between schools and communities are made more visible” (p. 50).

Kinloch et al’s work thus offers both a promising set of examples of counternormative possibility for youth’s literacy practices and also a harsh critique of schooled spaces that have failed to generatively engage with those practices. Implications from Kinloch et al. clearly align with those from Johnson’s study: What kinds of reimaginings of English curriculum and instruction are needed to help schools better attend to the vibrant yet largely ignored literacy practices of those at the margins? What can we learn from youth’s out-of-school practices that will help make school, if not (and perhaps never) enough, at least a more humane place to read, write, and live?

It seems like we as a research field (i.e., New Literacy Studies, as invoked in this study) have abundant evidence that youth can do incredible things, including writing their own (counter)stories, as this article and other previous scholarship
have revealed. What we know a lot less about is how conditions can be set up in classrooms (note the plural: not just a single classroom, but multiple classrooms—especially classrooms in high-poverty communities serving historically marginalized youth) for similar empowerment to happen in the current global political moment. In that sense, Kinloch et al.’s study, like Johnson’s, invites teachers to move youth’s often-marginalized out-of-school literacy practices toward the center of institutionalized, curricular schooltime.

De los Ríos and Seltzer’s piece, “Translanguaging, Coloniality, and English Classrooms: An Exploration of Two Bicoastal Urban Classrooms,” does just that, shifting the focus toward considerations of historically marginalized literacy practices inside school institutions. This article takes up the problem of the “colonial roots intertwined with English education” (p. 56) by exploring how two secondary English classrooms have taken up translanguaging pedagogies and Spanish-language texts, “releasing Latinx youth’s translingual voices” (p. 56) from dominant monolingual English Only ideologies in the United States.

The authors conceptually begin with speakers/writers and their creative tactics as opposed to languages (e.g., English, Spanish). This important move allows them to dissolve binaries like first language/second language, standard/nonstandard English, and native speaker/ELL. We appreciate the authors’ conceptual stance in calling their study participants emergent bilinguals as opposed to limited English proficient students (a term from the US federal government) or English language learners (a term used widely in the research). Instead, they conceptualize bi- and multilingualism as a dynamic process that operates as an asset for young people (or any people) navigating a linguistically diverse world. Indeed, the authors take “linguistic fluidity as the norm” and explore the question of how to “[build] pedagogy from students’ language practices” (p. 58) through decolonial notions of border thinking. Border thinking is “primarily concerned with recognizing the subaltern knowledge production of people living in currently colonial or formerly colonized nations, and is also concerned with the subjectivities of those who did not physically cross borders, but rather had borders cross them” (p. 58). De los Ríos and Seltzer further use the term Latinx to designate a “racialized language community” and to foreground the linguistic colonization of Spanish by English as an ongoing and historically enduring process within the United States.

The study design compares two secondary English classrooms where teachers are building pedagogy, instructional approaches, and curricular designs that center linguistic fluidity and translanguaging. The paper compares data from ethnographic classroom studies with bilingual/multilingual youth in New York City (taught by Ms. Ardizzone) and Los Angeles (taught by Mr. Molina). Classroom data included participant observation with field notes and analytic memos (both classrooms), analysis of students’ literacy artifacts (both classrooms), semistructured interviews with students (Mr. Molina’s classroom in Los Angeles), and audio recordings and transcriptions of classroom talk (Ms. Ardizzone’s classroom in New York City). The cross-case analysis described the instructional approaches in each classroom, comparing students’ literacy artifacts and responses with counternarratives that
emerged. The study presents two focal students—Lourdes in the Los Angeles site, Anna in the New York site—who the authors assert were “particularly representative of these language and literacy practices” (i.e., those involving border thinking and translanguaging; p. 63).

Through this comparison, the authors conclude that diverse teachers (even those who do not share students’ linguistic heritages) can enact translanguaging pedagogy that results in border thinking, border writing, and translanguaging. In this study, a central feature of this approach seemed to be the creation of units pairing translingual mentor texts that encouraged border thinking and translanguaging with explicit critiques of linguistic colonization. Such pairing opened space for students to “bring their racial, ethnic, and linguistic social worlds” (p. 69) to the center of their writing. De los Ríos and Seltzer found that the two focal students both explored “evading the colonial expectation that their language practices (and they themselves) be ‘legible’” (p. 69)—which brings us back to the guiding question of this essay. What became possible was an “alternative, proudly bilingual enunciation of themselves” (p. 70). Finally, the comparison yielded the insight that the sociogeographical histories of the two different classrooms mattered in the extent to which a “decolonial imaginary” emerged—a space where curriculum and instruction centered around “who and where students are as historically colonized and racialized subjects” (p. 70). The encouragement toward border thinking and translanguaging notwithstanding, both students still mostly wrote in English. While the authors believe this finding points to the monolingual histories of schooling and policies in these contexts, they do not interpret it as a deficiency of any kind.

With “Research in Creative Writing: Theory into Practice,” the issue shifts from secondary schools and students to postsecondary educational institutions (specifically English departments). Bailey and Bizzaro offer a way of thinking about marginality in terms of disciplinarity, epistemology, and method rather than racial, linguistic, or sexual identity. They situate their project in response to a previous RTE paper by San Pedro (2015), taking up the decolonial framework he uses and applying it to the creation of disciplines and the marginalization of some knowledges within them.

Their study analyzes students’ various “aesthetic documents” (e.g., poetry, scripts, visual narratives) in a first-year composition course, to consider what counts as evidence for teachers and researchers of creative writing. It asks what method(s) are best suited to the analysis of aesthetic data. Ultimately, these questions are asked in the context of a larger inquiry about the status of creative writing as a discipline: What battles ensue when scholars refuse to succumb to dominant cultural or disciplinary perspectives? Methodologically, the authors explore this question through a study that enacts a “creative writing methodology” that they see as suitable to the field of creative writing studies—the legitimization of which is a central project of their article. The design and questions of the study are ambitious. Bailey and Bizzaro elicited 57 students’ writing, across many classrooms, in response to the prompt How did you come to this place in your life? Tell me your
The authors coded and “reduced” these data into six analytic categories. Then Bailey wrote a novel that aesthetically responded to the coding work in a total translation or transformation of what students had done.

Importantly, we want to make a distinction here between marginality in the issue’s previous studies, where students’ identities were excluded from the center, and in Bailey and Bizzaro’s consideration of how the work of and research on creative writers has been marginalized as a subdiscipline. It’s a crucial distinction to make, we think, given the positions of privilege enjoyed by many faculty members in the United States relative to the student populations discussed in the previous papers. And yet, this raises for us an interesting question concerning the ways in which social, epistemic, and linguistic hierarchies come to be decolonized. While it certainly seems that some decolonial projects have more urgency than others, the reality is that, regardless of our relative positions of privilege within the institutions of education, we are all to greater or lesser extents dehumanized by the hierarchies created in the colonial matrices of power. Regardless of whether one sympathizes with the decolonial impulses of Bailey and Bizzaro’s project, it helps readers to understand how epistemic hierarchies enfranchise and disenfranchise particular types of work.

In this issue’s Forum essay, “Centering Disability in Qualitative Interviewing,” Kerschbaum and Price continue the discussion of marginalization and methodology. As “disabled researchers,” they interview “self-identified disabled faculty members to question some long-held commonplaces about qualitative interviewing” (p. 98). For them, disability might be recentered by qualitative researchers in a way that “turn[s] to disabled people’s lived experiences to generate transformational knowledge that can contribute to more equitable practices” (p. 98). Fittingly, centering disability is not so much about assimilating the practices of disabled researchers into the work of qualitative research, but rather about “developing new ways of moving (Dolmage, 2014) . . . in and around research methodologies” (p. 100). The margins of disability in/as research, then, are not included in but rather challenge, disrupt, and reshape the center in novel ways.

The final three articles perhaps most explicitly take up the questions of legibility and liminality that opened our essay. We are particularly struck by the conceptual and empirical evocation offered by de los Ríos and Seltzer. The authors show how Lourdes and Anna were living these questions of legibility and liminality in their writing in English class, as well as in their lives beyond the classroom. They show the many complications of setting up classroom spaces where students can take up such questions. And the unusually rich (at least in the pages of RTE) grounding of this research in decolonial studies raises many more questions for the field to consider. Spanish—as well as English—is implicated in the colonial enterprise: in many locations in the Americas, Spanish too was historically a colonial language, one used as part of the project of subjecting various indigenous groups to colonial rule. And as the authors themselves suggest, in different spaces in the United States, Spanish and English may be valued and related to quite differently by different “Latinx” communities (e.g., third-generation Cuban Americans in Miami vs. first-generation Cuban Americans in mid-Michigan). To some extent, the term Latinx
can mask the diversity of peoples who may fit within this categorization: those of Latin American descent who identify with indigenous groups and languages that were conquered by Spanish vs. those of Latin American descent who identify more with Spanish (or another language) as the lingua franca of their heritage nation-state vs. those of Latin American descent who identify more with Spain and the European conquistadors. The point here is that no language is entirely innocent and that individuals’ linguistic identifications are often complex—which is why border thinking and translanguaging offer powerful constructs for future investigations. These and other questions await further exploration in this rich vein these authors have tapped.

More broadly, this issue invites us to ponder method(ology): Both Johnson and Kinloch et al. make use of small case-study narratives involving 1-4 research participants, a methodology which has pervaded language and literacy studies for well over a decade. De los Ríos and Seltzer take a step beyond this with their focus on classrooms, rather than only students, although there too the $N = 2$. We find ourselves wondering whether the field has become saturated with these types of case studies and to what extent they can create grounds to argue for systemic change. Earlier in this introduction, we pointed to a legacy of research highlighting asset-based perspectives of family-based, out-of-school literacies, for example. Is it enough to continue doing research that demonstrates the value of these literacy practices without seeking to create the systemic change needed in the global educational system that continues to create social, epistemic, and linguistic hierarchies? And if scholars agree such change is needed, what can be done in the field to expand beyond the limitations of small $N$ case-study research to demonstrate how large-scale change might take place? For example, might we need more design-based studies (of the sort more often undertaken in mathematics and science education) that look closely at how teachers learn to see and value and build upon students’ rich literate repertoires (e.g., Turner et al., 2016)? Or might we use insights from computational linguistics and artificial intelligence that afford large-scale analysis of classroom discourse and yield comparisons of teacher and student interaction across classrooms (Olney et al., in press)? On the other hand, do the smaller-scale approaches presented in this issue underscore a continuing need, in this politically imperiled time, for nuanced, situated, contextualized work counter-narrating the lives of vulnerable populations like Black, queer, and immigrant youth? At the end of the day, is it narrative and counternarration that move hearts and minds beyond the academy?

REFERENCES


