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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

TOM LIAM LYNCH

IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, NCTE asked me to serve on a task force to help bolster critical media literacy support for teachers. Throughout our meetings, the group spent significant time discussing what critical media literacy really meant in the first place. When our final report came out, evidence of the term’s complexity was on full display. There were no fewer than nine varieties of terms that significantly overlapped: visual literacy, media literacy, information literacy, news literacy, multimodal composition, digital literacy, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical digital literacy.

Critical media literacy is not a single star burning brightly in the night sky. Rather, this area is better described as a constellation, a collection of stars that tell a story about how English educators engage with young people via an array of communicative modes in the spirit of inquiry, society, and action.

Even after nearly two decades in education, I knew my own star in the sky, but didn’t fully appreciate what it contributed to Orion’s broader shape. I share this because I suspect you feel similarly right now. If you are reading this, it is because you suspect critical media literacy is important and you want to learn more.

Well, what I experienced over the course of our task force meetings should bring you some comfort: there are many ways to explore and embody critical media literacy in your pedagogy. This volume tries to identify some of the approaches that have been observed shining most brightly in our shared professional sky.

You and your students have your own stars, too. And they await mapping.

I have curated a dozen and a half starry articles from NCTE journals published in roughly the last decade. Intentionally, they range in scope and tone: the classroom and the academy, microscopes and telescopes. Some situate readers immediately with feet on the ground in ELA classrooms, with microscopic attention to the way individual teachers and students attempt to realize critical media literacy together. We read of Mr. Davis unpacking war propaganda in his seventh-grade classroom. Choudhury and Share offer a pedagogical tour of their explorations of critical media literacy with sixth-grade students learning English as a second language. We meet young Theo, who—as author Jon Wargo retells it—wove together audio recordings of bird songs to create an experiential learning opportunity for his community. Gonzales et al. examine how teachers can use multimodal composition techniques in an extracurricular setting to help children who live on the US-Mexico border examine the challenges of dual identities and home. Documentary video creation, as Doerr-Stevens describes, has underappreciated potential to reinforce, complement, and complicate traditional forms of writing instruction. Nichols shows that school administrators who launched an ambitious makerspace initiative risked perpetuating the very inequitable instructional practices it attempted to counteract. There is even a kind of pedagogical playlist from three of the field’s champions of youth participatory action research, who offer concrete instructional examples of what it means to invite students into authentic inquiry and action in the world (Mirra et al.).

Other articles take a telescopic view, using the daily realities in English classrooms as a guide for where to look up and interrogate the field’s
conceptual skies. We hear from Ernest Morrell on the ongoing challenges of reconciling critical media literacy with the traditional literacy definitions that still comprise standards and tests. College composition professor Courtney Rivard argues that as our world becomes increasingly digitized, it is vital that English students gain familiarity with digital archives and metadata, an argument that is echoed by Noah Golden’s warning of the perils of high-stakes data in schools and statehouses. Computer science, I argue, holds phenomenal potential to deepen and expand the teaching of literature in ways that prepare students for the challenges of twenty-first-century digital ethics. Two pieces focus their gaze on the injustices and complexities of race and identity: Ellison and Solomon present nuanced retellings of how African American children and their parents view their relationship with digital technologies and the “digital divide.” Haddix et al. offer an intimate and powerful dialogue, framed as a kitchen table conversation among Black literacy researchers and activists, about what it means to honor and nurture the cultural literacies of young Black women.

Several articles create astronomical maps of the critical media literacy constellation over time. Kist reflects on the hundreds of middle schools he has visited and researched to identify patterns in how middle school students approach new literacies. Video games, Abrams and Gerber demonstrate, have more to teach us about feedback and assessment methods than meets the eye. Petrone and Bullard reread over four hundred articles in English Journal over a five-year period to better understand the representation of critical media literacy, the pedagogical messiness of which merits greater attention. And if Hicks and colleagues offer a sweeping review and critique of the relationship between digital technologies and pedagogical innovation, Garcia and colleagues argue something similar in direct response to the rise in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each article I selected for this edited volume represents a star from NCTE’s archival galaxy. As with any constellation, these stars are just some of the ones that shone most brightly for me. Other editorial stargazers might have noticed different ones. Nevertheless, I hope that the constellation mapped within these pages offers you assurance in navigating what critical media literacy could mean in your professional setting.

As our teaching continues to respond to and shapes the needs of this new millennium, we must turn ever more frequently and charitably to each other. The daily realities of classrooms, schools, districts, and state offices so often make it difficult for English teachers to connect with each other. It is up to us as individuals to ensure our professional communities are lit and burn fervently.

Volumes like this help; they amplify the dedication and creativity of English teachers and educators around us. But more is needed.

Leveraging the infrastructure and mission of NCTE is another vast resource for English educators. The richness of this volume is not mine, but rather belongs to a community of colleagues who took the time to publish their work for others. So too NCTE is ultimately a product of our collective professional energy. While I invite readers to connect with me directly (@tomliamlynch on most platforms), I also urge readers to redouble their commitment to our professional home: NCTE. Become members, attend conferences, participate in online communities, and volunteer to serve.

Our students, for whom we are responsible, are poised to inherit one of the most complicated epochs in human history. We should prepare them not only to read and write words on the page, but also to bravely examine how a wide range of communicative modes—alphanumeric language, video, image, audio, computer code, apps, data archives—shape the opportunities and crises real people experience in their daily lives. What we do matters. This volume represents the outline of a constellation, within which you yourself already have stars. Our students have stars too. Use this book to find their precise location, to seek out collegial clusters. Together we can map a cosmic plane and be confident that it prepares our students to venture out toward new horizons after they disappear from our view.

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