Teachers who fight to give their students the tools and opportunities to read about and write on topics of their choice and express ideas that may be controversial are, in editor Mollie V. Blackburn’s words, “revolutionary artists, and their teaching is revolutionary art.”

The high school English language arts teachers featured in Adventurous Thinking engaged their students with topics such as immigration, linguistic diversity, religious diversity, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, interrogating privilege, LGBTQ people, and people with physical disabilities and mental illness. Also included are an interview with Angie Thomas, author of The Hate U Give, and a chapter on censorship by Millie Davis, former director of NCTE’s Intellectual Freedom Center. This book is grounded in foundational principles from NCTE’s position statements The Students’ Right to Read and NCTE Beliefs about the Students’ Right to Write that underlie these contributors’ practices, principles that add up to one committed declaration: Literacy is every student’s right.

Visit: bit.ly/NCTE_AdventurousThinking
or call toll-free: 1-877-369-6283
Editors’ Introduction

The Politics of Teaching Literature

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas  Amy Stornaiuolo
University of Pennsylvania  University of Pennsylvania

Gerald Campano  James Joshua Coleman
University of Pennsylvania  University of Pennsylvania

Reading and English language arts function as a primary curricular space for “political interventions, struggles over the formation of ideologies and beliefs, identities and capital” (Luke, 2004, p. 86). For example, one urgent political intervention involves racial equity. Numerous literary texts provide opportunities for dialogue about race in our society. Novels like Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, plays like Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the work of poets like Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou have been part of high school English curricula in many districts and states for nearly a generation. However, in recent times, even this expanded canon has faced challenges from multiple fronts: the imperatives of neoliberal educational reform; corporate standardized testing that prioritizes “testable” curriculum; learning standards that squeeze out stories in favor of informational texts; and even the demands of critical and radical educators who, in efforts to further decolonize education, call multicultural classics into question, advocating instead for the teaching of literature that is more relevant to contemporary students’ lives.

When teaching literature for youth and young adults, many educators do so with the intent of creating ethical and literate citizens for a global society. Furthermore, in addition to the diversification of the literature that young people read, as the demographics of our classrooms, schools, and society shift, the application of critical lenses that are multicultural, diverse, decolonizing, and humanizing to *all* texts for youth and young adults will become even more essential (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Some students of the social media generation are bringing their own critical lenses into our courses, while others are invested in nostalgia and more traditional ways of reading texts. Increasingly, there have been generational rifts, informed by social media, regarding which texts to use in the curriculum and how to teach them. As instructors of students coming from many different perspectives, it is our task to encourage discursive pluralism, even if this means leaning into pedagogies of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). We do this in hopes that creative tension around the selection, evaluation, and teaching of literature will, as Dr. King noted in his famous letter from a Birmingham jail, lead to equity, justice, and social change.
The articles featured in this issue each locate pathways for realizing Dr. King’s call for change in literature and the politics that surround the texts we teach. Exploring change in relation to narrative, Sylvia Pantaleo, in “Metalepsis in Elementary Students’ Multimodal Narrative Representations,” demonstrates children’s capacities to play with stories, to create characters that ascend, descend, and shift between story-worlds in ways that reveal the “illusionary effect of the narrative” (p. 26). This article’s focus on how elementary school children create metaleptic devices in picture books provides new insight into building “narrative competence” through composing with metafictive elements. Pantaleo affirms that elementary-age children can harness the power of narrative worlds, drawing upon available designs to promote “cognitive flexibility” (Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson, 2013). Such scholarship draws attention to the procreative power of literature in even the earliest years of schooling, showing the empowering effect of teaching elementary students to cultivate multimodal composing practices that reveal narrative’s constructed nature. Pantaleo’s research affirms that elementary school students benefit from sharing their stories, crafting narrative worlds in assertion of their agency as storytellers, creators of literature, and budding agents of social change.

Examining change over time, Sarah Levine walks her readers through 118 years of history, demonstrating how English language arts exams have always operated as a contested political site for the assessment of literary knowledge. “A Century of Change in High School English Assessments” presents findings from a content analysis of 110 New York State Regents Exams that spotlights a century of trends in questions about literature. Drawing upon quantitative and qualitative data, this comprehensive work traces four primary threads of analysis: (1) diverse authorship and the Western canon; (2) emphasis on particular genres; (3) the balance between literal and interpretive sense-making; and (4) the privileging of different literary theories. Levine’s timely article adds to a series of evolving conversations regarding the teaching and assessment of literature in an increasingly multicultural society, and reaffirms the need for state and national exams to incorporate “texts that act as ‘mirrors’ and ‘windows’ for a more diverse student body” (p. 50).

Finally, Ryan Schey and Mollie Blackburn engage literature’s political potential by exploring acts of rupture in the literacy practices of high school students. In their article, “Queer Ruptures of Normative Literacy Practices,” these authors position “reading with ruptures” as a destabilizing practice that rejects fixed epistemologies, thus opening possibilities for reorienting encounters with queer-themed literature. Described as “a risk worth taking” (p. 77), reading with ruptures generates breaks in normative literacy practices that call attention to rote interpretations of gender and sexuality, as well as to the tacit whiteness often clinging to those categories. Schey and Blackburn’s article calls for a new model of reading, one that shifts from practices of “seeing, understanding, and connecting” to practices that help readers “visualize, hypothesize, and empathize” (p. 77). Drawing upon the theoretical affordances of queer theory and, particularly, queer-of-color critique, this article calls for ruptures of normative literacy practices that gesture toward much-needed ruptures in literature’s political positioning.
The In Dialogue section of this issue focuses on the politics of teaching literature. We invited four scholars from across the career span—Deborah Appleman, Patricia Enciso, E. Sybil Durand, and Angel Daniel Matos—to comment on some of the challenges of teaching literature as we move into a new decade. Their words remind us that in the shifting social and cultural dynamics of the twenty-first century, stories still matter. The teaching of literature still matters. Literature presents cautionary tales and catharsis; delight and devastation; meaning and mirth; humanity and hope. But ultimately, literature has the potential to provide mirrors, windows, and doors into our students’ histories and lived experiences, as well as insight into the lives of others (Bishop, 1990). Inquiry about how today’s students are reading, responding to, and restorying literature, as well as how educators select, choose, and evaluate literary curriculum, is vital for understanding the human condition—even in our digital age. In a moment when literature itself is being redefined, it is our hope that this issue might illuminate new pathways for research on the teaching of literature—ones that bring to the fore the politics of imagined story-worlds as easily as the political structures embedded in the classroom worlds where daily we teach.

REFERENCES