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Special Issue Theme

The Racial Literacy Turn: Moving Beyond Binaries and Racial Literacy for All Approaches to Qualitative Racial Literacy Research

Guest Editors

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> Recently, Laura Chávez-Moreno (2022) has incited a "turn" that suggests that racial literacy needs to evolve beyond conceptions of being either racially literate or illiterate to understanding racial literacy exists on a spectrum and is a skill that everyone possesses. In order to cement this turn, there must be an acknowledgment that racial literacy is operationalized in radically different ways. (Bell & Sealey-Ruiz, 2026, p. 65)

This special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* invites original articles on the genealogies, theorizations, contemporary developments, and futurities of Racial Literacy in Education research. Racial literacy has long been conceptualized as a set of skills and analytical practices that enable individuals to recognize, interpret, and disrupt racism at personal and structural levels (Guinier, 2004; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011, 2013, 2022, 2026; Skerrett, 2011; Stevenson, 2014; King, 2016). Across the field, the acceptance that racial literacy is a skill that can be developed is not an anomaly but rather the norm, where developing racial literacy can help individuals and institutions identify and disrupt racism. Most racial literacy scholarship has therefore sought to identify and challenge the ways race, racialization, and racism are experienced and operationalized in school settings (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; King et al., 2018; Skerrett, 2020).

Over the last two decades, racial literacy scholarship has expanded across multiple educational and interdisciplinary contexts. Scholars have examined racial literacy development through literary analysis (Croom, 2018, 2020); classroom dialogue (Epstein & Schieble, 2019; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013); reflective writing and epistolary practices (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Grayson, 2018, 2021; Bell, 2022; Bell et al., 2022); family and home socialization processes (Nash et al., 2018); and embodied pedagogies that understand bodies as racialized, gendered, and sexed texts (Ohito, 2022). Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates that racial literacy instruction can deepen students' understandings of structural inequity and foster critical consciousness.

At the same time, emerging scholarship has begun to interrogate one of the field's central assumptions: the tendency to conceptualize racial literacy through a binary framework of being either racially literate or racially illiterate. As Chávez-Moreno (2022) argued, the racially (il)literate binary can limit scholars' ability to analyze the pervasive and often subtle operations of race-evasiveness and hegemonic racial ideologies. Within this binary framework, racial literacy is often flattened into a singular determination of whether individuals possess or lack racial awareness. For example, while racially literate analytic frameworks have been profoundly generative for literacy education research (e.g., Croom, 2020), they can unintentionally position racial literacy as a fixed condition rather than a socially and ideologically mediated process.

Importantly, Chávez-Moreno (2022) contended that "construing racial literacy strictly as antiracist obscures that making meaning of race can be done through hegemonic ideologies" (p. 1). In other words, all individuals engage in meaning-making about race, but they do so in ways that may reproduce or challenge racial hierarchies. According to Ellis (2016), race consciousness itself is not inherently liberatory: "One may have a subordinationist race consciousness or an egalitarian race consciousness" (p. 500). Thus, rather than understanding racial literacy through a static binary of literate or illiterate, scholars are increasingly conceptualizing racial literacies along a continuum ranging from hegemonic to counterhegemonic forms. This continuum creates analytic space to examine how literacy practices may unintentionally reproduce antiblackness, race-evasiveness, and White supremacy, while also making possible pedagogies that cultivate Black joy, solidarity, and racial justice in educational settings.

This special issue centers two interconnected strands of racial literacy research that are increasingly shaping the field. The first strand examines the theoretical and pedagogical implications of moving beyond the racially literate/illiterate binary toward more expansive understandings of racial literacies as ideological, contextual, embodied, and relational practices. This strand invites scholarship that interrogates hegemonic and counterhegemonic racial literacies; analyzes race-evasive literacy practices; and explores how racial literacy is operationalized across literacy instruction, teacher education, curriculum studies, language practices, embodiment, affect, and educational policy.

The second strand foregrounds the relationship between racial literacy, racial identity development, racio-ethnic identity, and regional sociopolitical contexts. Racial identity development scholarship (Carter, 1991; Cross, 1991; Helms, 2014; Bañales & Rivas-Drake, 2022) demonstrates that individuals from different racio-ethnic groups experience race, racism, and identity formation through distinct historical, cultural, and psychosocial trajectories. Consequently, students do not encounter racial literacy instruction as racially neutral learners; rather, they engage such pedagogies through identities shaped by histories of racialization, migration, regional politics, language, schooling, and community socialization.

Despite this insight, relatively little racial literacy research has examined how racial identity development interacts with racial literacy pedagogy across differing institutional and regional contexts. Existing scholarship often conflates the outcomes of racial literacy instruction across racio-ethnic groups, particularly when students of color are positioned as developing positive racial identities, while White students are positioned primarily as learning to recognize and respond to racism (Curenton et al., 2022; Tembo & Jones, 2025). Moreover, limited attention

has been paid to how regionality and sociopolitical context shapes racial literacy practices and racial meaning-making. Students in urban, suburban, rural, Southern, Midwestern, Northeastern, borderland, and international contexts encounter race through distinct institutional histories, political discourses, and local racial formations that profoundly influence how racial literacy instruction is interpreted, resisted, or embraced.

Accordingly, this special issue will address these conceptual and empirical gaps by investigating how racial literacy instruction functions across diverse educational contexts and among students from different racio-ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, we invite qualitative, interdisciplinary, and theoretical scholarship that examines how racial identity development, regionality, and sociopolitical context shape students' engagement with racial literacy pedagogies and practices. Understanding these dynamics is critical for literacy education. If racial literacy is to function as a pedagogical framework capable of supporting students in recognizing and disrupting racism, educators must develop instructional approaches that attend to the distinct racial identity trajectories, regional histories, and sociopolitical realities students bring into educational spaces.

List of Possible Topics

Submissions should address ways that racial literacy has been theorized, deployed, and/or may transform in the future. Topics include, but are not limited to:

- **Articulations of Racial Literacy** - How can racial literacy be articulated to account for differentiated racio-ethnic experiences with race, racialization, and racism? For instance, Bell (2026 pre-print) calls for the creation of group-specific racial literacies and has operationalized Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) and Racial Literacy to articulate a theory of Black racial literacy that hyperfocuses on Black people's experiences, antiblack racism, justice, and joy. Authors may look to Bell's (2026 pre-print) Black racial literacy and Norova's (2022, 2025, 2026) AAPI racial literacy works as entry points for exploring and articulating group-specific racial literacies. Authors may theorize, for instance, what Puerto Rican racial literacy looks like and how and why it can support Puerto Rican students with identifying and responding to constructions of race and the unique forms of racism and racialization that Puerto Ricans experience. Such theorizations may look towards the inherently complex nature of racio-ethnic and regional identity to disrupt flat racial literacy for all teachings and practices.

- **Genealogies of Racial Literacy** - What are crucial contributions to the field since Chávez-Moreno's (2022) intervention that argued for a continuum of racial literacies? Authors may explore the genealogy of racial literacy by analyzing how it has been deployed and evolved in work over the past 25 years since the foundational works of Guinier (2004) and Twine (2004). Such explorations may look towards the complex nature of the field that has grown to challenge racially literate or illiterate approaches to understanding racial literacy now to think about racial literacies across a spectrum. This means that folx who adopt race-evasive practices or racist ideologies are engaging in racial literacy practices, albeit ones that sustain racism. What does thinking about racial

literacy as a spectrum and exploring group-specific experiences with race, racialization, and racism mean for racial literacy now and in the future?

- **Policy Implications** - In what ways does thinking about racial literacy as a continuum and creating racio-ethnic specific racial literacies offer critical considerations for policy? How may racial literacy contend with racism in schools? How can racial literacy disrupt LGBTQIA+ discrimination? In what ways can racial literacy articulate viable paths through opposing forces? Authors may explore the applicability of racial literacy to advancing social justice-oriented change in education.

- **Research Applications** - Pieces on research applications can demonstrate how racial literacy informs critically engaged research. Racial literacy instruction (Skerrett, 2011) has generally been used to support positive racial identity development for students of color and help White students learn about and respond to racism, but how can racial literacy research contribute to more justice-oriented futurities by understanding racial literacy as a continuum and accounting for the ways that racio-ethnic identity and region shape race-based experiences? How can the current moment in racial literacy shape research that centers students' humanity and creates more equitable outcomes?

- **Methodological Considerations** - How does racial literacy that moves beyond racially literate or illiterate paradigms change how racial literacy research is conducted? How might racial literacy researchers leverage understanding racial literacy as a continuum to better understand how racism operates in our current sociopolitical climate and how racism is perpetrated by people who do not consider themselves racist in contemporary society? Methodological considerations through articulations of racial literacies may discover how specific racial literacy methods can better serve students and their communities to disrupt racist perspectives that continue to sustain inequitable socioeconomic conditions and life outcomes.

- **Embodiment** - Recently introduced in the racial literacy research, embodiment reveals the visceral experiences encountered when race is discussed in classrooms (Ohito, 2022). Esther Ohito challenged the lens through which racial literacy is understood by focusing on the body and affect. Ohito's socio-material approach to literacy disrupts the racially literate or illiterate binary by broadening what racial literacy and its focus is. She suggested that "racial literacy instruction is (inter)embodied and affective and that each body is a particular racialized, sexed, gendered, and otherwise marked text" (p. 1). Ohito's work builds on Skerrett's (2011) racial literacy instruction scholarship by framing racial literacy instruction "as an (inter)embodied and affective learning assemblage" (Ohito, 2022, p. 2). Her focus on the body raises awareness of how multimodal racial literacy instruction can have the unintended results of (re)producing antiblackness. This *Special Issue* engages with Ohito's work and asks authors to illuminate the enduring centrality of embodiment to producing new knowledges within the field of racial literacy. How might the evident fact of a Queer of Color body change an educational site? How might discussions of race, identity, and power incite embodied experiences that are fraught with tension and discomfort? How can racial literacy

instruction be improved to assuage fraught embodied experiences? How might thinking about embodiment serve as an entry point for improving racial literacy instruction?

- **Archaeology of Self and Methodological Implications** - Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz's (2022, 2026) Archaeology of Self (AoS) offers one of the most significant methodological interventions in racial literacy scholarship by centering deep self-reflection, historical excavation, and critical self-interrogation as necessary practices for disrupting racism. AoS asks educators, researchers, and students to critically excavate the historical, familial, regional, cultural, and institutional experiences that shape their understandings of race, identity, and power. Importantly, AoS challenges race-evasive notions of objectivity by recognizing that researchers and educators always enter educational spaces already racialized and ideologically positioned. In many ways, AoS disrupts racially literate or illiterate paradigms by refusing static categorizations of racial consciousness and, instead, framing racial literacy development as an ongoing, recursive, and deeply affective process of becoming. Authors may explore how AoS can function methodologically within racial literacy research to uncover hidden hegemonic racial literacies and race-evasive ideologies that shape educational research and practice. How might AoS help researchers better account for the ways regionality, racio-ethnic identity, embodiment, and institutional context shape interpretations of race and racism? How might AoS support qualitative methodologies that center vulnerability, reflexivity, relationality, and justice-oriented inquiry? How can AoS serve as a methodological tool for disrupting the reproduction of antiblackness, whiteness, and other hegemonic racial projects within educational research itself?

- **Regionality and Racial Literacy** - Existing racial literacy scholarship has often approached racial literacy instruction as though it occurs similarly across educational spaces. Yet race, racism, and racialization are experienced differently across regions, communities, and institutional settings. This *Special Issue* invites authors to examine how regional sociopolitical contexts shape racial literacy practices and racial meaning-making. How might racial literacy function differently in the U.S. South than in the Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, or Pacific Northwest? How do rural, suburban, urban, borderland, and transnational contexts shape students' engagements with racial literacy instruction? Authors may explore how local histories of segregation, migration, settler colonialism, immigration, policing, language suppression, and educational inequity shape distinct regional racial literacies. Such work may also investigate how regionality complicates flat notions of racial literacy pedagogy by revealing that students enter classrooms with racially differentiated understandings of race informed by their communities, histories, and political climates.

- **Race-evasiveness and Hegemonic Racial Literacies** - Chávez-Moreno's (2022) intervention fundamentally shifted racial literacy scholarship by arguing against construing racial literacy strictly through antiracist frameworks. Instead, Chávez-Moreno contended that racial meaning-making also occurs through hegemonic and race-evasive ideologies that sustain racism while often appearing racially neutral. This *Special Issue* invites scholarship examining the hidden and normalized racial literacy practices that perpetuate inequity in schools and society. Authors may investigate how students,

educators, families, policymakers, and institutions operationalize racial literacy practices that deny structural racism, reproduce whiteness, or reinforce antiblackness while claiming race neutrality. What methodological and theoretical tools are needed to identify hegemonic racial literacies that may not explicitly reference race yet nevertheless sustain racial hierarchies? How does thinking about racial literacy as a continuum ranging from hegemonic to counterhegemonic forms reshape educational research and practice?

- **Black Joy, Healing, and Abolitionist Racial Literacies** - While racial literacy scholarship has often focused on helping students identify and disrupt racism, emerging work also asks how racial literacy can intentionally cultivate Black joy, healing, flourishing, and abolitionist futures (Bell, under review). This *Special Issue* invites authors to examine how racial literacy pedagogies can move beyond solely documenting racial trauma and oppression toward creating educational spaces that affirm humanity, relationality, creativity, and resistance. Authors may explore how Black racial literacy, culturally sustaining pedagogies, abolitionist teaching, and freedom dreaming create possibilities for students and educators to imagine socially just futures. How might racial literacy pedagogies center joy as a political and educational act? How can racial literacy instruction interrupt the overemphasis on Black suffering within classroom discourse while still critically engaging structures of racism and antiblackness? What pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical possibilities emerge when racial literacy is framed not only through resistance to oppression but also through the creation of liberatory educational futures?

- **Language, Racialization, and Racial Literacy** - Scholars such as Rosa and Flores (2017) have demonstrated that language practices are deeply connected to racialization processes and hegemonic ideologies. This *Special Issue* invites authors to explore how language and literacy practices function as racialized processes within educational settings. How do students make sense of race through language, dialect, multilingualism, accent, translation, and communicative practice? How might racial literacy help illuminate the racialization of bilingual students, immigrant students, Indigenous language speakers, and students who engage non-dominant linguistic practices? Authors may also explore how racial literacy can uncover the race-evasive ideologies embedded within “standard language” expectations and literacy curricula. Such work may reveal how literacy instruction often reproduces racial hierarchies through language regulation while positioning whiteness as normative and linguistically neutral.

- **Futures and Futurities of Racial Literacy** - As racial literacy scholarship continues to expand, this *Special Issue* asks authors to imagine the future directions and possibilities of the field. What does racial literacy become when scholars move beyond racially literate or illiterate frameworks and instead conceptualize racial literacies as multiple, contextual, embodied, and racio-ethnically situated? How might future racial literacy scholarship respond to contemporary political attacks on race-conscious education, diversity initiatives, queer and trans existence, and critical pedagogies? Authors may theorize the futurities of racial literacy in relation to emerging technologies, digital

literacies, global racial formations, climate displacement, migration, abolitionist movements, and transnational solidarities. What new methodological, pedagogical, and theoretical approaches are necessary for racial literacy scholarship to respond to rapidly changing sociopolitical realities while remaining committed to justice-oriented educational transformation?

- **Racial Literacy in Conversation with Other Critical Theories** - Bell's (2026 pre-print) Black racial literacy work exemplifies how racial literacy is an inherently interdisciplinary field that engages with other critical theories such as BlackCrit, LatCrit, AsianCrit, TribalCrit, QueerCrit, and other forms of critical studies. Pieces in this area may seek to describe the generative possibilities that emerge when combining racial literacies and critical theories. How might using LatCrit, QueerCrit, and racial literacy demonstrate how Dominican Queer students in the Bronx make sense of their complex socially constructed identities and rearticulate how gender and ethnic roles manifest in meaningful ways in their lives? How does AfroLatiné identity shape educators' approaches to teaching racial literacy at a Midwestern school with a predominantly White student population? How do Indigenous and Black students operationalize racial literacy to come to terms with White supremacist government identity policies of Blood Quantum that stand in direct contrast to the Black one-drop rule?

Timeline

Abstract Due: Monday, January 4th, 2027

Abstracts of no more than 500 words are due to co-editor Jordan Bell via email: Jbell50@umd.edu. Please include a title and the names and affiliations for each author.

Co-Editor Response: Monday March 1st, 2027

The co-editors will provide a response to submitted abstracts via email. Abstracts that align with the call will be invited to submit full manuscripts of 6,000 to 9,000 words.

Manuscripts Due: Monday, May 3rd, 2027

Manuscripts should be submitted in Microsoft Word in APA 7th edition format.

Co-Editor Decision: Monday, August 2nd, 2027

The co-editors will provide feedback on the manuscript and invite accepted manuscripts to revise their manuscripts.

Revised Manuscripts Due: Monday, October 4th, 2027

Revised manuscripts are due to the co-editors, who will curate a peer-review process for accepted manuscripts.

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