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Neoliberalism, Critical Literacy, and the Everyday: A Post-Qual Informed Multi-Genre Inquiry

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Abstract: Weaving together post-qualitative theories, critical scholarship, and my own lived experiences spanning over 30 years in Mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, and the U.S., this multi-genre inquiry explores how critical literacy practices and what has come to be known as neoliberalism are entangled in what we do, how we get to know, and who we become in our everyday lives. Thinking with Barad and St. Pierre, I write this inquiry as a way of mapping, moving, and becoming, with which I hope to create entry points to (1) engaging with the barely intelligible and the *everyday* and (2) considering what some of the hegemonic discourses *do* to us and what we can *do* with them.

Keywords: critical literacy, discourse studies, multi-genre inquiry, neoliberalism, post-qualitative study



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*I dedicate this article to my brother Leo
and billions of brilliant youth in this world*

仍然自由自我
永遠高唱我歌
走遍千里

Introduction

Why Does It Matter?

Many writers who tried to detail what is detailed in this paper were either imprisoned or gone. The definite majority of those who have experienced what is written in this paper were never given a chance to go to college or even high school, let alone have the privilege of telling their stories. And these untold stories from the past are still happening around the world in billions of human beings' lives.

Neoliberalism and Critical Literacy

Over the past three decades, what has been known as neoliberal discourse has become an “everyday discourse” (Leitner et al., 2007) circulating not only in political economic practices and mainstream corporate media but also in various education systems across the world (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2013; Chang & McLaren, 2018; Chun, 2015, 2017; Coles, 2019; Flores, 2013; Harklau & Coda, 2019; Kubota, 2011, 2016). With an increasingly commodified and privatized education model, neoliberal practices such as high-stakes testing, ranking and elite schooling, value-added measures in teacher evaluation, and the search for the “best practices” have shaped and will continue shaping what we do, how we get to know, and who we become in detrimental ways. Behind these practices are the diminished focus on our social-emotional and physical well-being (Jones, 2014), the reduction of active political citizenship to extreme passivity and political complacency (Brown, 2005), and the construction of the entrepreneurial self that renders all individuals as competitive capitals and reduces human capacities to commercial

algorithms (Chang & McLaren, 2018; Foucault, 2008). As Jones (2014) noted, one of the things neoliberalism has brought to us is the “one-size-fits-all curriculum and accountability system that wraps its tentacles around expectations, values, language, practices, and what used to be called ‘education’” (p. 124).

To address these inherently complex issues, scholars in the field of language and literacy education took up various forms of critical literacy pedagogies/practices (CLP) to create a venue for students and educators to engage with and contest the neoliberal discourse in school contexts and beyond (e.g., Block et al., 2012; Chang, 2021; Chun, 2013, 2015; Clarke & Morgan, 2011; McLaren, 2005; Jones, 2014, 2020). As a critical approach towards both our everyday and disciplinary literacy practices, CLP comes with a strong critical self-reflexive stance and is often used to (1) draw upon teachers and students' shared and distinct lived experiences, identifications, and cultural epistemologies in dialogical responses to textual/visual/material resources; (2) interrogate multiple viewpoints and address assumptions and views toward taken-for-granted textual/visual representations, materiality, and larger discourses in specific sociocultural and situational contexts; and (3) address issues around power/power relations in both classroom contexts and our society at large.¹

When it comes to neoliberal discourses↔practices, for example, Chun's (e.g., 2013, 2015) ethnographic study examines how CLP supported students and their teacher in addressing discourses of neoliberal identities, globalization, and consumerism in an English language classroom in Canada. Coming from both critical (e.g., Freire, 1970; Gramsci, 1971;

¹ The definition of what's been called “critical literacy” varies. Lewison et al.'s (2002) provided a good overview of some of the early CLP works. What I provide here are some key CLP components that are relevant to this

inquiry, rather than a working definition of what “critical literacy” is. Heeding posthuman onto-epistemologies, this inquiry looks at what CLP *does*.

Halliday, 1978, 1994) and poststructural (e.g., Foucault, 1979, 1980) perspectives, CLP in Chun's work focused on the interrogation of multi-semiotic meaning-making processes and how certain neoliberal textual/visual representations achieved a taken-for-granted status in local \leftarrow \rightarrow global contexts. Situated in the field of literacy education and teacher education, Jones (2014) brought together voices from researchers and teaching practitioners in the U.S., showing possible ways in which students' lives, interests, and critical events in our world can be brought into classroom contexts to enact CLP. Thinking with posthuman and new material theories (e.g., Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), Jones (2014, 2020) shed light on teaching toward openness and solidarity—toward cultivating a critical way of being that stands in opposition to the neoliberal push in education. With a rare, close look at the sociopolitical and historical contexts of Mainland China and Hong Kong SAR,² Chang and McLaren (2018; Chang, 2021) discussed the development and potential of critical literacy theories and methodologies in relation to classroom pedagogies, ongoing sociopolitical movements, and junctures and ruptures of neoliberal education in these contexts.

This Inquiry

Weaving together theories from post-qualitative (post-qual) traditions (e.g., Barad, 1999, 2007, 2017; Foucault, 1970, 1987; St. Pierre, 2011, 2018, 2019), critical scholarship (e.g., Brown, 2005, 2015; Janks, 2010; Jones, 2014; Lefebvre, 1987), and my own lived experiences spanning over 30 years in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the U.S., this multi-genre inquiry explores how CLP and some of the dominant hegemonic practices of neoliberalism, both discursive and material, are entangled in the nexus of doing, knowing, and be(com)ing in our *everyday*

(Lefebvre, 1987, 1988). In the pages that follow, I first introduce a *post-qual informed multi-genre approach* towards the inquiry and the *everyday*. I then lay out the nonlinear “structure” of the inquiry through an arts-based mapping (Zhang, 2020) of its trajectories and unbounded timeframe. Following inquiry sections, a brief reflective and call-for-action section is provided as both the coda of the inquiry and the overture for the risky, surprising, and much-needed work that is yet to (be)come.

Post-Qual Informed Multi-Genre Inquiry and the Everyday

A major challenge in addressing neoliberal rationality and practices is that, often viewed as the defining political and economic order of our time, the construct neoliberalism itself is rhizomatic and fluid. It travels across time, space, and sector; it transforms and adapts to specific sociocultural and situational contexts (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Chun, 2017); and even its very existence is at times questionable (e.g., Brown, 2015; Clarke, 2008; Peck, 2010). As Brown (2015) pointed out, it is almost a scholarly commonplace that “there is temporal and geographical variety in [neoliberalism’s] discursive formulations . . . and material practices,” which “exceeds the recognition of neoliberalism’s multiple and diverse origins or the recognition that neoliberalism is a term mainly deployed by its critics” (p. 20).

In this paper, it is the questioning of neoliberalism’s intelligibility and materiality that calls into being what I term *post-qual informed multi-genre inquiry*, an inquiry approach that refuses “methodologies;” an approach that supports my ongoing, multi-layered engagements with neoliberalism as a *loose and shifting signifier* (Brown, 2015); an approach that

² After the “handover” from the U.K. to China in 1997, what was known as British-Hong Kong became what is now called Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative

Region). Hereafter I use the term “Hong Kong” to refer to Hong Kong SAR.

might move both the readers and myself towards the barely intelligible.

Post-Qualitative Inquiry

An introduction to a post-qual informed multi-genre approach is perhaps best begun with the explanation of what has come to be known as *post-qualitative inquiry* (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011, 2018, 2021). Since post-qual scholarship itself refuses categories and underlying structures, the term *post qualitative/post-qual* in this paper refers to a body of literature loosely situated in/around poststructuralism, posthumanism, new materialism, and other un-categorized onto-epistemological orientations. A post-qual inquiry, thus, should not be thought of as a certain kind of methodology nor analytical tools (e.g., St. Pierre, 2018, 2021). Rather, it is a way to write and think with theories while engaging with, but not trying to (re)present, complex things in life (e.g., Jackson, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Kuby, 2019). Drawing primarily upon poststructural scholarship (e.g., Foucault, 1970, 1987; Derrida, 1972; Deleuze, 1968; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), post-qualitative inquiry deals with a variety of issues such as those around language, power, discourse, and agency. It supports writers in resisting/interrogating taken-for-granted onto-epistemological arrangements and producing openings for thinking the un-thinkable, facing the incalculable, and “responsibly [re]imagining and intervening in the configurations of power” (Barad, 2007, p. 246).

What post-qual inquiry does and its onto-epistemologies are the major sources of inspiration, strengths, and thinking that support the coming-

together of different genres and theories in this paper as a way to engage with the “unintelligible:” things in life that kick back (Barad, 1999), theories and constructs that are still in-the-making (St. Pierre, 2018), and the messy, perplexing trajectories and points in the *everyday* (Lefebvre, 1987, 1988) that reject any pre-existing analytical frameworks or genres of inquiry. Those aforementioned issues that post-qual inquiry deals with (e.g., language, power, discourse, and agency) are at stake, in one way or another, throughout this inquiry.

The Everyday, the Material \leftrightarrow Discursive, and the Coming-together

“What post-qual inquiry does and its onto-epistemologies are the major sources of inspiration, strengths, and thinking that support the coming-together of different genres and theories in this paper as a way to engage with the “unintelligible:” things in life that kick back.”

Informed by Lefebvre’s (e.g., 1987, 1988) critique on the *everyday* and *everydayness*, this inquiry situates every homogenous, repetitive, and fragmentary moment in our everyday lives as a nodal point of a dynamic, un-finalizable network of our embodied cultural, historical experiences at different times and places—where we lived and were (re)produced by the larger neoliberal discourse in ways that we might not be aware of. Lefebvre (1988) underscores that in what he called the “modern world,” the *everyday* has been transformed from a “subject” with possible subjectivity to an “object” of social organization. As an effort to (un)make sense of, or at least engage with this *everyday*—this complex network of our embodied cultural and historical experiences, I view my writing/doing of the inquiry not so much as certain type of analysis or argumentation. Instead, it is more of a *material \leftrightarrow discursive* (Barad, 2003, 2007) practice, happening at the intersection of our nonlinear trajectories of discourse and actions across time,

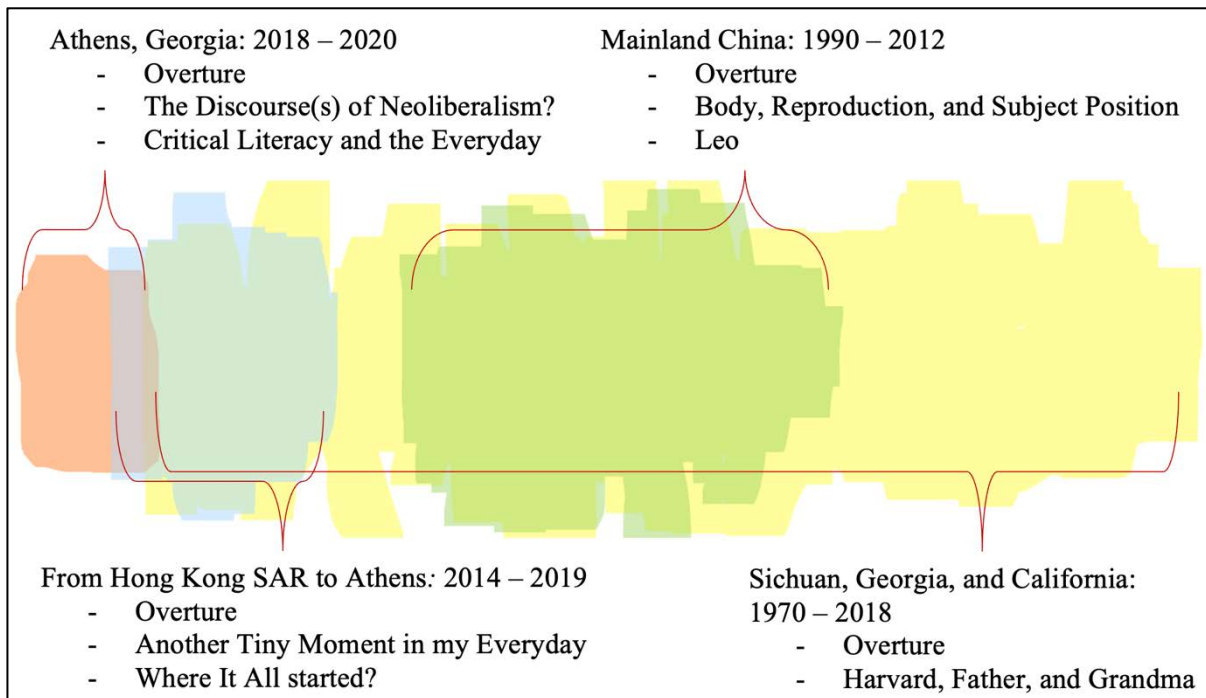
place, and media (Zhang, 2022). The inquiry is therefore written in a nonlinear manner with constant shift of story timelines, sites, and genres and theories involved in different sections. I see this form of inquiry as a way of mapping, moving, and becoming—rather than arriving or delivering. I hope to create entry points for both the readers and my *self* to (1) engage with the barely intelligible and the *everyday* and (2) reflect on what some of the hegemonic discourses *do* to us and what we can *do* with them.

The construct material \leftrightarrow discursive (Barad, 2003, 2007) discussed above conceptualizes the discourse(s) and the materiality as always already *entangled* with each other. Inasmuch as this *entanglement* (Barad, 2007) emphasizes the lack of “an independent, self-contained existence” (p. ix) rather than the connectedness of two independent entities, neither discourse(s) nor materiality can pre-

exist their interactions: they only “emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (p. ix). It is therefore always the material \leftrightarrow discursive, not material *and* discursive. And thus, in this inquiry, I look at not just how neoliberal discourses function, but how they materialize. I ask what do things *do*, rather than what do they mean. These questions shift our lines of thought to “not only how discursive performative speech acts or repetitive bodily actions produce subjectivity, but also how subjectivity can be understood as a set of linkages and connections with other things and other bodies” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 113). Therefore, I see what we do, who we are/become, and “our” agency as always produced, contested, and reproduced as we *intra-act* with the *human and nonhuman others* (Barad, 1999, 2003, 2007), be they people we ran into on a university campus, names and test scores displayed in a public space, or various forms of material objects we grew

Figure 1

Nonlinear mapping of the inquiry



up with. All these real-life examples/experiences are detailed in this inquiry.

Mapping the Inquiry

The inquiry is composed of four interconnected sections and employs various forms of dialogues, narratives, poems, images, and analytical summaries. Due to the unique genre(s) of the inquiry, many key analytical/theoretical explanations are included as footnotes. The four sections are interconnected in the sense that both their storylines and textual/visual content are always already entangled with one another. For example, people and things involved in the first section can only exist in their intra-activity³ (Barad, 2003, 2007) with my lived experiences in Hong Kong discussed in the third section. That is, none of these things would have happened without my experiences in Hong Kong, and what I have done and seen in Hong Kong can never be re-membered or re-turned to (Barad, 2017) without what came after my time in Hong Kong. To create multiple entry points to these sections, these material $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ discursive trajectories of my/our everyday, each inquiry section starts with an overture that functions as a transition and rhymes with the flow of the section.

As shown in Figure 1, with the digital oil pastel drawing of different colors merging into/intra-acting with each other, the image visually foregrounds the entangled nature of people, times, places, and objects involved in the inquiry. Moving toward various directions, the lines and shapes of these colors⁴ indicate the unbounded, nonlinear timeframe of mapping. Things and matter(ing)s discussed in the

inquiry are therefore still moving, growing, and in-the-making—toward the past, the future, and the unknown.

Athens, Georgia: 2018 – 2020

Overture

*“ . . . those tiny understandings
that take place between two or more bodies
in a moment in time
—or across time—
hold the very wisdom we may need . . . in education”
(Jones, 2014, p. 2).*

The Discourse(s) of Neoliberalism

“Yo whatup? Wanna play together?”
“Sure. You got other people coming?”
“Naaa just me kicking around.”

In the summer of 2018, I ran into David and Raul⁵ at the university soccer field and started playing soccer with them. We became good friends. Both David and Raul grew up in Athens and graduated from a local high school in 2019. Soon after David went to university, he started picking up voices from both sides—peers supporting Bernie and peers rooting for Trump. In the fall semester break of 2020, I had dinner with David and Raul at a local Asian buffet restaurant, during which David asked me about my thoughts on Bernie and socialism. He told me that at the university, he met a lot of people who support Bernie without knowing what socialism is or what Bernie has proposed, which “kind of pissed him off.”

³ The term intra-act/intra-action/intra-activity (Barad, 2003, 2007) is different from interact/interaction because, from a posthuman perspective, things do not pre-exist their “interactions,” rather, they only exist in their intra-activities and are always (re)produced differently as they intra-act with one another.

⁴ These “lines and shapes” were never there to represent things/times: they are only (re)produced as different

colors *intra-act* with one another, with the “white” background. That is, I did not draw lines/shapes, we see lines/shapes only because there are different colors intra-acting with one another. The use of colors is thus not for the representation of meanings or esthetic purposes.

⁵ All names, aside from the author’s, are pseudonyms.

“Socialism is communism right? Like in China?”

David brought up this question at the beginning of our conversation, expecting me to “say something.” I then went on to explain “well not necessarily. . . .” Drawing upon scholarly work I have read on capitalism and neoliberalism (e.g., Brown, 2005, 2015; Chang & McLaren, 2018; Chun, 2017) and my own lived experiences back in Mainland China and Hong Kong, I tried to explain that socialism does not “equate” to the concept known as “communism,” and what has been going on in Mainland China over the past three decades is absolutely not the socialism that has long been in conversation here in the U.S..

Maverick (Mav): “You know, in capitalism you work for eight hours per day, five days a week, you feel like you got paid for eight hours, but maybe you just got paid for four hours—whatever you’ve produced in the other four hours were taken away by people like the company owners or capitalists.”

David: “So do you think this is good or not?”

Mav: “Well you know, there are problems. For example, do everyday people have a say in terms of how much being taken away? Is it just a couple of company owners making decisions on their own? Or maybe a lot of us are not even aware of this? Like in China I felt like my parents only got paid for ONE hour out of what they’ve produced in eight hours—the government is super rich but everyday people are like earning nothing.”

Both David and Raul knew that my father is one of the best mechanical engineers in a huge government-owned company but has been earning around 1000USD per month over the past ten years (2010-2020)—it looked like my explanation made some sense. I then briefly mentioned the “abandonment of any socialist aims by the Communist Party in China”

(Chun, 2017, p. 43) and the transition from “private-owned capitalism” to “state-owned capitalism” in the Soviet Union (Chun, 2017, p. 12).

David looked very satisfied.

I thought we might then switch to other topics such as the NBA playoff-bubble and our upcoming pool-hangout. However, David moved on with other questions:

“Why do you think people support Bernie? Look at Sweden, do you want Bernie to tax us 60% on what we earn?”

. . .

“Sweden has ZERO class mobility right? Look, we have high class mobility here and our economy is good. All-time high. So capitalism is good, right?”

. . .

“With socialism, you work hard, work your butt off and earn the money, become a billionaire, but then they are gonna tax you 60%? They wanna take away your money. Do you like that?”

. . .

I tried to address some of his questions:

“well, I wouldn’t say capitalism is good or bad, I think it works for some but not the others”

. . .

“Well...I don’t know much about Sweden, but Bernie’s not gonna be taxing all of us 60% right? Maybe just some of us, and maybe 40% or less?”

. . .

“Well, I’m not an expert of all of this, I agree with you. Like I wouldn’t say ‘capitalism’ is a ‘dirty’ word, but I think there are always things to improve you know. . . .”

I became less and less talkative.

Maybe I was getting sleepy. Or maybe it was the food coma, which happens a lot when I have access to an all-you-can-eat meal. At that moment, I felt that it was just a bunch of random things quickly going through my mind: Those ideas that David picked up from his peers—are they drawing upon the so-called “American Dream” and seeing the government/tax as a threat/problem? So government should stay out of the “free market?” I certainly don’t want “them” (who? the government?) to take away my money—but am I positioned as a potential “billionaire?” Are we rooting for my 1000USD monthly stipend? Or for those who managed to become billionaires? How many people will get taxed 60% or even 40%? Are we talking about the everyday people, working or middle class families, or the 1%?

I did not bring up any of these thoughts. At the end of the dinner, I asked David if he had voted yet:

Mav: “oh by the way, did you vote?”

David: “Yes of course.”

Mav: “good good! Always important to go out there and vote!”

David: “Yeah sirrrrr!”

Critical Literacy and the Everyday

Maybe it was not the food coma.

That day, I was perhaps just unsure what to say or how to say what I wanted to say—it was a buffet restaurant, and we were just friends hanging out. The entanglements of space, place, body, and discourse, at that very moment, made it challenging for me to keep the conversation going. Thinking with Barad (2003, 2007), I see intra-actions like these I had with David and the material surroundings in my *everyday* (Lefebvre, 1987, 1988) as part of our shared

material←→discursive trajectories, along which what we do (social actions) and who we become (social identities/relations) are produced, contested, and reproduced.

Reflecting on the *intra-activity* and the *everyday*,

I wondered

if I, as a classroom teacher and researcher, would be able to address what was called into being that night?

Are there ways in which I could open up the floor for my students

and bring in these critical/teachable moments?

Will some of my students just “get pissed off” and walk out of my classroom?

Will they ever come back?

And from the perspective of critical literacy as a collaborative (be)coming together (Chun, 2015; Jones, 2014), one could ask: what kinds of social identities and social relations (ways of becoming) are (re)produced/contested if my students never come back?

I am fortunate to have David and Raul as friends, and I appreciate those tiny but intimate moments we had. As Janks (2010) noted, there is a need for teachers to take and explain their critical stances on certain texts and discourses erupting in classroom contexts, which also ties into Freire and Macedo’s (1987) work on reading the word and the world in ways that are interconnected with one another.

I have always known that when I walk into a classroom, there could be David, Raul, and many others, asking me questions and wanting me to talk about it:

“Maverick you are the teacher,

tell us what's going on out there!?
Tell us why is this happening!?"

From Hong Kong SAR to Athens: 2014 – 2019

Overture

*“Looking,
like writing,
is shaped by social and political contexts in which we
live
and crafted through our habits of attention and
inattention—
habits formed through power relations
circulating in the material conditions of our lives
and discourses in our society.”
(Jones, 2014, p. 126)*

Another Tiny Moment in my *Everyday*

Wait isn't Maverick from China?
When did he move to the States?
He's just teaching English grammar to ESL students
right?
Wait he knows American politics?
Why is he interested in neoliberalism and critical
literacy?⁶

I am not sure what people would think if they
overheard my conversation with David and Raul, or if
they saw me going door to door canvassing with local
county commissioners for the Georgia senate runoff.
I did, though, meet and chat with many people who
were surprised and/or confused by the ways in which
I talk, my social media posts, and basically—my ways
of doing and be(com)ing.

For example, a few months after the start of my Ph.D.
program, I ran into a new acquaintance, Sarah, at the
university parking lot and had a quick conversation
with her. Sarah has been working closely with
students from Mainland China since early 2000s.

While we were chatting, she asked me if I grew up in
China and told me that

*“Your social media posts are so liberal.
I've never met anyone from China who is so
liberal.”*

She meant it as a compliment, and I took it as such.
Her then nine-year-old was standing right next to us
and asked

“Mom, what does liberal mean?”

Both Sarah and I laughed. I said: “Wow, that's a big
question.”⁷

Where It All Started

As I discussed in a recent publication (Zhang, 2022),
my experience at City University of Hong Kong
(CityU) and subsequent engagements with critical
scholarship such as Freire (1970), Gramsci (1971), and
Janks (2010) as well as a number of sociopolitical
movements (e.g., Chun, 2019; Flowerdew, 2016; Lou &
Jaworski, 2016) added a layer of fluidity and
complexity to my *self* and my doing in the *everyday*.
Looking back at those moments in time and points in
space, I would not say that it just all started in Hong
Kong. Since our material \leftrightarrow discursive itineraries
are forever on the move (Zhang, 2022), much like the
rhizomatic mapping (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), it

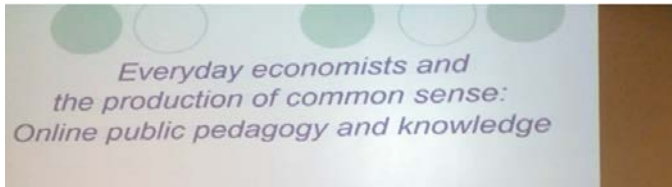
⁶ These questions that I encountered frequently in the
everydayness of my life are viewed by many critical
literacy scholars (e.g., Chun, 2015; Kubota, 2004, 2016) as
part of the larger liberal *and* neoliberal multicultural
discourses.

⁷ It was perhaps another tiny moment at which our
everyday CLP was called into being. And it certainly
became part of the material \leftrightarrow discursive trajectories
shared by Sarah, her daughter, and myself.

refuses to have one single “starting point.” But I do believe that my experience in Hong Kong could serve as a good entry point to segments of my trajectories of doing and be(com)ing.

Figure 2

A research seminar at CityU (April, 2015)



The photo in Figure 2 was taken by myself as one of the audiences at the beginning of a research seminar in which my professor talked about his ongoing research. It was my first encounter with the term “neoliberalism” and scholarly work on the discourses of capitalism.

Yes, it was the first time in my life. I was born and raised in a small town in Sichuan, China and had never been to anywhere outside of Mainland China until my experience at CityU. And what does that mean?

In a book chapter on critical literacy in Hong Kong, Chang (2021) discussed “the very different histories of Hong Kong versus mainland China, and their disparities in critical literacy scholarship” (p. 262). He indicated that the absence of critical literacy scholarship “can be partly attributed to research paradigms that mainland professors often have to operate under, and the restricted bandwidth they have to critique PRC [People’s Republic of China] educational and political systems” (p. 262). In alignment with Chang and McLaren’s (2018; Chang, 2021) work, a conference talk of mine might provide more concrete examples. Referring to the larger sociopolitical context of a classroom ethnographic-case study conducted years ago, I explained:

Chinese central government has its hegemonic power over all media and educational resources. So [when] my students turn on TV—they can only watch what the government allows them to watch. And they don’t have “legal” access to Facebook, Instagram, or whatever related to Google. Even textbooks are censored. Some of my high school students were taking AP history courses, . . . pages of these textbooks were ripped off before they were delivered to my students . . . Within this context, a lot of my students don’t talk about politics, or power relations, outside forces. Here I’d like to bring up the concept from Hilary Janks [2010]. . . So here’s the capitalized ‘P’ Politics, which is about government, decision-making, policies. But also here’s the lower-case ‘p’ which is the politics in our everyday lives, weather we are going to school or in a professional setting. . . there are always power-relations circulating. . . But these are not part of my students’ everyday life conversation. (Zhang, 2019)

My contextualization of the study was in line with relevant scholarly works written both before and after the presentation (e.g., Chang, 2021; Chun, 2019; Flowerdew, 2016; Lou & Jaworski, 2016). As Flowerdew (2016) stated:

Patten promoted a discourse concerning the British legacy to Hong Kong, consisting of four elements: a free market economy, freedom of the individual, rule of law, and democratic institutions. These four elements are very important, because they, arguably, represent what makes Hong Kong different to Mainland China and they are at stake in one way or another with the Occupy movement. (p. 528)

I agree with Flowerdew. Not because he was one of my professors, but because I lived in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and I was there, in one way or another, as part of that Occupy Movement.

Figure 3

CityU AC1 lobby (September, 2014)



Figure 3 shows one of the many photos I took in a variety of locations during the movement, including Central, Admiralty, Kowloon Tong, and Hong Kong University. The photo features a slogan written in traditional Chinese characters “風雨中抱緊自由,” displayed in front of the main library of CityU. It was also the lobby of what was then called building Academic 1 and often functioned as the main entrance to the university. These Chinese characters can be translated as “*Holding Tight To Freedom In The Storms*” and were used in multiple public spaces where social actions were produced, contested, and reproduced in the year of 2014 and onward. The slogan was originally part of the lyrics from the song *Glorious Years* by legendary British-Hong Kong band *Beyond*. The song was written in 1990 as a tribute to Nelson Mandela and many freedom fighters around the world. It later became an iconic cultural symbol of Hong Kong society and thus also part of the material←→discursive itineraries shared by millions of social individuals both in Hong Kong and overseas.⁸

Although “Hong Kong has endured numerous societal problems from British rule to the present” (Chang, 2021, p. 263), it was at CityU where I started engaging with a number of sociopolitical movements and was introduced to critical literacy, discourse analysis (e.g., Flowerdew, 2013; Scollon, 2001), and ways of doing and knowing (e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Halliday, 1978, 1994) that later became part of my teaching, researching, and everyday life. It was some of these critical moments and scholarship that supported me in rejecting neoliberalized subject positions and extreme political complacency (Brown, 2005), so that I had a chance to (un)make sense of my own lived experiences, identifications (Hall, 1996), and the pain and struggle I had while growing up in Mainland China.

Mainland China: 1990 – 2012

Overture

*Theories are powerful
but also have their limits.*

Body, Reproduction, and Subject Position

Question (Q): Mav, does gender or sexuality matter in neoliberalism?

Answer (A): I guess so.

Q: How?

A: They target sexuality so that our “bodies” will stay in their own little box, quietly doing what they should be doing—and the society will just keep running⁹, everything will “just be fine.”

Q: What do you mean by “keep the society running” and “everything will be fine”?

A: Well you know, in order to ensure the smooth operation of a neoliberal society, they need people to fall in line according to certain

⁸ Another example of the critical (be)coming together and CLP in the everyday discussed previously in this paper.

⁹ See Foucault (1979, 1987) on body, discipline, and power relations and Brown (2005) on “the neoliberal citizen.”

gender and sexual norms. They need some type of stable order of heterosexual reproductive social groups in order to progress.

Q: So they need to make sure that men and women are getting married and having kids?

A: Um...well I think they might focus more on the “some type of stable order” thing. So yeah probably not just about having kids...¹⁰

- Comrade *** (name of my mother), *** (name of my father)—in response to the One-Child Policy, are **willing to** have only one child...
- In response to #[79]14 provincial policy.
- This certificate is issued to the person who is **willing to** have only one child...
- This certificate **grants** corporation-provided free medical treatment, Kindergarten education, and health care.

Figures 4-1 and 4-2 feature the One-Child Glory (Honorary) Certificate issued to my parents on September the 28th, 1990, 15 days after my birth. As it is rightly named, this “Honorary Certificate” was designed just like many other certificates¹¹ that “represent” certain kind of honor or esteem in Chinese society over the past many decades: shining red cover with nicely printed golden characters. The certificate was issued by the “*** (name of a huge government-owned) corporation Family Planning Committee,” as printed at the bottom of the cover. Some of the texts on the other two pages shown above can be translated as:

Figure 4-2 is the page that features my name, gender, date-of-birth, and other information. The profile picture needs to be renewed every few years, until the end of my annual “health care bonus,” which, as shown on the right side of the photo, is “2004/8.”

The government-owned corporation mentioned above had around 30 thousand employees at its peak. Prior to the Chinese economic reform that took place in my hometown in late 1990s, the corporation had its own “community,” including K-16 schools, hospitals, prisons, and police stations.

Figure 4-1

One-Child Glory (Honorary) Certificate I



¹⁰ I use the genre of an everyday conversation to explain complex things. The conversation itself is not “real.”

¹¹ Such as a college degree, veteran certificate, and player of the year in local soccer leagues.

Figure 4-2

One-Child Glory (Honorary) Certificate II

姓名	[REDACTED]	采取何种措施	
性别	男	发保健费开始年月	1990/9/13
出生年月	1990.9.13	保健费停发年月	2004/2/8
父名	[REDACTED]	备注	12岁(1423)
民族	籍贯		
工作单位	[REDACTED]		
母名	[REDACTED]		
民族	籍贯		
工作单位	[REDACTED]		

Q: “Mav, what do you see in these photos?”

A: “A fancy cover, **benefits, willingness, and institutional forces.**”

“Oh and I myself, a little me, my grandpa took that photo for me. I was not happy that day, got too much homework I guess.”

In a theory-based art piece, I indicated—and showed—that there is no way to interpret or even look at what has been called “representations” without considering what we *do* with them (Zhang, 2020). Inasmuch as the *self* is always already entangled with the materiality (Barad, 1999, 2007), I would say that here in this case, I am not just looking at a Glory Certificate, I am looking at particular ways of doing and knowing, a peculiar set of onto-epistemologies in my/our *everyday*. Growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, like most of my peers, I had never even thought of having a brother or sister—just like the Glory (Honorary) Certificate quietly lying somewhere back at home—it was one of the things that did not matter at all. Over the past three decades, we saw having one or both of our parents

going through sterilization surgeries willingly and having tens of thousands of moms going through abortion unwillingly as “how things work in this world,” or what is now called “it is what it is.” As part of the larger health/medical discourse that came into social circulation in Mainland China decades ago, “taking pills” has long been framed as “unhealthy” or “extremely bad for female’s health.” Sterilization surgeries that had to be done in institutionalized spaces such as government-owned hospitals/clinics, however, were strongly recommended.

From a Foucauldian perspective, we see our body as always “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, 1979, p. 25). When it comes to dominant neoliberal discourses coupled with the sociopolitical hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) behind it, I think there is more to it. For example, what does it mean when the material \leftrightarrow discursive practices of “going through sterilization surgeries happily, or at least willingly” becomes part of the *everydayness* (Lefebvre, 1987, 1988) of life? And what does it mean when mainstream media and school textbook representations of

“a family = a father, a mother, and a child”¹²

becomes the common-sense beliefs (Gramsci, 1971) shared by millions, if not billions, of social individuals?

It could go back to the “some kind of stable order” that ensures “the smooth operation a neoliberal society” which I brought up earlier; it might require our thinking toward the active critique of normativity and meanings (Deleuze, 1968; Derrida, 1972); and it

¹² It has been gradually shifted to “a family = a father, a mother, and two–three children” in recent years due to particular sociopolitical and economic reasons.

certainly ties into the question that many current critical literacy scholars may ask: how have certain material \leftrightarrow discursive practices, but not the others, achieved a taken-for-granted status in a society?¹³

There is more to it.

Leo

To write about my brother Leo, I would like to start with a quote from Jones (2014) on neoliberalism and education:

The intensity of testing and measuring and concepts such as time-on-task, coupled with the diminished goals of social-emotional and physical well-being for children and youth, would drive even the best intentioned teacher to do things she would not have done under different policy directives. (p. 124)

When neoliberal rationality and practices are upgraded to an extreme level with the material forces of the sociopolitical hegemony, I believe that even the best-intentioned parents would do things they would not have done if they could have started imagining a slightly different system/world (e.g., St. Pierre, 2021).

Given that being the only child at home was the “norm” in Mainland China for more than three decades, a lot of peers in my generation ended up hanging out with cousins, especially cousins who were of similar ages. My cousin Leo and I lived right next to each other. It was around a one-minute walk from my front door to his. We grew up just like brothers. We hated each other because one of us might get more attention from our parents at one particular moment, also because we would sometimes destroy each other’s toys and fight for

video games. Of course, we also had fun doing sports, playing card games, and hanging out together. Like most of our peers, Leo and I did not even use the word “cousin,” inasmuch as it did not make much sense to us. We were just brothers.

Cousins? What’s the difference?

Why do we even need that word?

If we are cousins then who has brothers?

Why do we need the word “brother” then?

The use of these words as well as their meaning-making (Halliday, 1978, 1994) are inherently material \leftrightarrow discursive (Barad, 2003, 2007) and tied into our everyday CLP. Since what is “normally” viewed as “brother” was never part of our materiality in that particular socio-historical context, both the meaning- and sense- making of these words were (re)produced differently in our *everyday*.

Leo and I started hanging out less and less since grade-nine, as we both needed to “study hard” in order to get into college. And what does that mean in Mainland China? Throughout our high school years, both Leo and I had to be physically in our classrooms either taking classes or studying for tests/exams from 7:30am to 9 or 10pm, Monday through Saturday. After we went home at around 10pm, we had to keep working on our homework till midnight. Both of us were trained as soccer players, so sometimes we would spend our Sunday morning playing soccer, then go back to school in the afternoon.

I remember back in 2019, one of my co-workers here in the U.S. asked me if we actually had a “life” as teenagers or if some of us felt depressed and went to see a doctor. I said, “Well you know, it’s like we didn’t even have time to get depressed.”

¹³ I see the writing/doing of inquiry in this section as a way of doing CLP in my everyday.

I was not joking.

If we are just (re)producing highly-functional machines that can “stay quietly”¹⁴ in their designated subject positions (Brown, 2005, 2015; Foucault, 1979) and keep the larger state-owned capitalism system running, “being depressed” and “having a life” are probably not part of the conversation.

Like most of my soccer teammates, neither Leo nor I liked many things we were forced to learn back in middle school and high school, especially the ways in which we were positioned as subjects who needed to “obey” all orders/rules (Brown, 2005; Freire, 1970) with almost no agency. I use the word “almost” because, from a post-qual point of view (Barad, 1999, 2003; Foucault, 1987), one could argue that there is always agency as we intra-act with the human and nonhuman others. For example, in an extreme situation, when power relations get stuck somewhere, one can still kill themselves to refuse being part of the system,

just like what two of my classmates did.

One of them was my neighbour and, of course, was the only child in his family. After all these years, I still run into his parents when I visit my parents back in where I was born and raised. It is one of the things in

life that still and perhaps forever kicks back (Barad, 1999).¹⁵

Again, like most of my soccer teammates, both Leo and I were labeled as “bad students” and “not qualified for college education” throughout our high school years. These labels were based on “science” and numbers. For example, in all kinds of exams designed to prepare us for the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), Leo and I could only score around 350 out of 750, much lower than our peers labeled as “almost qualified.” These numbers,

“These numbers, together with our names, were often printed out and put up on walls either inside or outside of our classrooms. They became part of the *everydayness* in life, part of our material↔discursive trajectories, and part of the larger neoliberal discourse in public spaces that (re)produce who we are/become and what we do in detrimental ways.”

together with our names, were often printed out and put up on walls either inside or outside of our classrooms. They became part of the *everydayness* in life, part of our material↔discursive trajectories, and part of the larger neoliberal discourse in public spaces that (re)produce who we are/become and what we do in detrimental ways.

After high school, it took both Leo and me one extra year to get into colleges. Leo went to

a local community college and was planning on transferring to a local public university. He told me about his plan in early 2012. I did not show any kind of support—we grew up being taught to compete with each other rather than to hang out with or support each other. It was perhaps one of the ways in which the shift from exchange to competition as the core of the market (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008) extended to my *everyday*, to Leo’s *everyday*, to what

¹⁴ As part of the reduction of active political citizenship to the extreme passivity and political complacency (Brown, 2005) mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

¹⁵ It kicks back in the sense that it goes beyond the limits of theories, be it on the entanglements of space, place,

memory, the critique of the *everydayness*, or the material consequences of certain hegemonic discourses. More importantly, what happened to my classmates was not rare—it was, and still is, an *everyday* thing.

Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) called “all aspects of being” (p. 155). And it hurts.

On June 20, 2012, Leo passed away. He was 20, and I was 21.

I was preparing for my finals. My family only had a limited amount of money that could support my travels, which meant I could only have one, not two, round-trip ticket to home—either for Leo’s funeral, or when he still had some time left. Dad asked me to “come home” as soon as possible, so that Leo and I could see each other, chat, and hang out for the last time. Leo struggled for around three weeks. I watched him dying in the hospital.

Dad made the right call. Attending a funeral would have meant Nothing to me, nor to Leo.

When we were kids, our parents did not allow us to hang out very often, since we had to focus our time and energy on schoolwork, like most of our peers. Our parents did want us to compete with each other, so that we could push each other to be “better.” For example, Leo and I were often encouraged to eat more food to be stronger, and to eat faster to save time:

“Look Mav’s eating more!”

“Mav, see Leo can finish eating quickly! Why are you so slow!?”

I remember once Leo was pissed off, and questioned his parents:

“Yes Mav’s eating more.

So what? Why does it matter at all?”

I am not sure if these things that we do and say (material↔discursive) in our *everyday* are part of the neoliberal push for maximized efficiency and competitive positioning when it comes to education (Brown, 2015; Jones, 2014). I think they are. And I do wish that I could let Leo know that both him and I, and many of our soccer teammates, were, and still are, qualified for college education. I wish that I could tell him that I got into Harvard—it’s not our problem Leo, it’s theirs!¹² And eventually, I wish that Leo and I could have the luxury to just grab a drink and chill.

I worked hard over the past many years and had never taken anything for granted.

Because in all these years,

I felt that I was not just living my life,

I was also living his.

Sichuan, Georgia, and California: 1970 – 2018

Overture

*“What makes us human
is our relationship with and responsibility to the dead,
to the ghosts of the past and the future”
(Barad, 2017, p. 87).*

Harvard

It was in early 2018; I was admitted to a Ph.D. program at the University of Georgia and an M.Ed. program at Harvard.

I went back to my hometown.

My father and my grandfather looked at me as if I was an alien – as if they did not know this kid anymore.

¹² As a response to dominant discourses (e.g., anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps; if you can’t “make it,” then it’s your problem!) that shift the blame from sociopolitical and economic systems to social

individuals—particularly those in the group that has been called the “99%” and those from certain racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Chun, 2015, 2017; Coles, 2019; Jones, 2014).

Because to them,
I was still the “bad student,”
Not qualified for Any college education.

I was happy,
because I made them proud.
My parents were thrilled.
They had a hard time falling asleep.
My dad became a “superstar.”
Many of his co-workers,
high school classmates,
and random acquaintances
came up to him,
asking for the “secret” of getting into
Harvard.¹³

I was sad,
because all my soccer teammates,
including Leo,
are brilliant youth,
and they worked harder than I did.
A lot of them were never given a chance to
attend college.
The offer package from Harvard
means
there were, are, and will be
millions, if not billions, of kids
out there in this world,
who might be “qualified” for Harvard
but were, are, and will be
destroyed by those labels
coupled with the neoliberal push
and the institutional forces behind it.

I took the Ph.D. offer,
because I knew that
power relations are everywhere,

and the only way to “fight” power,
is with my own “power” of knowledge,
literacy,¹⁸
of being able to speak back.

Wendy Brown (2016) shared some of her thoughts on how neoliberalism has transformed the nature of education during an interview on her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (2015). Referring to a specific time period in U.S. history, she said:

When I went to the University of California in the early 1970s, the cost was about 600[USD] a year, that was tuition and fees. . . I was able, as a student who did not get support from my family, to be able to take a part time job and thrive at the University of California. That’s no longer possible, for a variety of reasons.

She then discussed the neoliberal push in our education reform and pointed out that nowadays,

very few students of working class or. . . even middle class can look at our college education, as we did in my time or your time, as something that has to do with expanding your capacities as a human being, and your capacity as a citizen. Instead, the question is how much money do you put in, for how much you will get out as a potential hire at the other end.

Father, Grandma, and Grandpa

When it comes to decision-making,
Dad asked me:
“how much scholarship you got from Harvard?”

¹³ The doing (changing social actions) and becoming (changing social relations) here tie back to the “ranking and elite schooling” mentioned at the beginning of this paper as part of the everyday neoliberal discourses ← → practices. It also connects to how both Leo

and I grew up being constantly compared with other kids in terms of our “achievement.”

¹⁸ “Power” as power relations circulating in the *everyday* and existing in our intra-activity with the human and nonhuman others.

*How much you got from UGA?
Is it secured?
What kind of job will you get after a Ph.D.?
What kind of job will you get after Harvard?
How much will you be earning?”¹⁹*

I was not surprised, not at all.
He’s my dad,
and I knew him.

It was an afternoon in my junior year.
After a phone call with my dad,
I stood in the lobby of my university academic
building,
crying,
for 20 minutes.²⁰

I needed 200 bucks²¹ for my GRE test.
Dad refused to support me.
Because to him,
I was still that “bad student,”
Not qualified for Any college education.

He believed that it was a waste of money:
*“English is not even your native language”
“you can’t compete with Americans”
“you can’t get a high score anyway”
“then why you take that test?”²²*

How did I eventually convince my dad?
I did not.
Not until I got into Harvard.

My grandma paid for that GRE test.

She did not know what it was,
just saying:
*“well,
maybe my son has a tight budget these days,
let me support my grandson then.
He just wants to study right?
To take a test,
it doesn’t sound bad.”*

Grandma passed away in late 2015.
I wish she could know that I got this far.
I wish I could tell her
how much that 200 bucks meant to my life,
and to many others’.

Figure 5

Grandma and grandpa



Figure 5 is the last picture I took for Grandma. The man standing next to her was my grandpa. After taking the picture, I went back to Hong Kong for my graduation. She passed away few days after I received my M.A. degree.

¹⁹ My father asking these questions can never be interpreted as an isolated action emerging from nowhere. It took place at the intersection of multiple material ← → discursive itineraries with my father and many others’ lived experiences, as shown above in Wendy Brown’s talk as well as the continued storyline in the texts that follow.

²⁰ The embodied ways of knowing enacted in that 20 minutes in a public space has always stayed and might

forever stay with me, along with the pain and struggle that exceed the limits of theories.

²¹ It was a lot of money to me, as I struggled to keep my monthly living expense below 200 USD during my college years.

²² It was not my dad. It was the neoliberal push for competition and economical, the institutionalized subject positions, and assumptions associated my sociolinguistic identities that I have long been struggling with.

The Coda↔Overture

In the last few days of her life,
she was not in a good mood.
She kept complaining,
about Grandpa,
about her marriage,
about life.

Grandpa just stood there,
listening.
He's a good listener,
and more importantly,
he knew that
Everything Grandma complained about
was true.

Dad once told me
when he and my two uncles were kids
back in late 60s and early 70s,
at the end of every single month,
Grandma had to take them to one of her
relatives',
asking if she could borrow some money.

Dad did not lie.
I know him.
When it comes to food,
he does not have ANY preference,
and he never will.
Because to him,
having food is luxury.²³

When Grandma retired in early 1990s,
her salary was around 20 USD/month.
I did not take that 200 bucks for granted,
and I never will.

In alignment with post-qual inquiry's ontology of immanence (Deleuze, 1995; St. Pierre, 2019) and the entangled nature of the self and the others (Barad, 2003, 2007), this multi-genre inquiry is neither a delivery of objective thoughts/arguments nor the arrival of certain types of conclusions/solutions. It is a way of moving and becoming, through which I submitted my *self* as a writer "to be summoned by different people and things at different places and times" (Jones, 2014, p. 126), be they my soccer teammates with whom I grew up, my family members who struggled to make ends meet in the 60s and 70s, those who went canvassing with me in freezing cold wind for the 2020 election, or the billions of brilliant youth that are yet to come into this world. It is also a way of moving and mapping that supported me to pinpoint the pain and struggle, making them the location for theorizing (hooks, 1994), and to engage with ways of doing and knowing that do not fit into pre-existing, formalized categories—those that are barely intelligible and perhaps forever in-the-making along with changing situational or sociopolitical contexts.

As the texts pull us towards the barely intelligible, it might seem that with every question we ask, many more follow. And as social individuals, we may still feel hopeless in changing or even challenging the hegemonic material↔discursive practices that contour the projects of not only neoliberalized states and corporations but also nonprofits, schools, scholars, students, graduate programs, and more (e.g., Brown, 2015; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Therefore, I see the *doing* of this inquiry as an effort to create some openings where we get to lean over the edge of predictability and responsibly (re)imagine slightly different ways of living that are yet to

²³ It is one of my father's embodied ways of *re-membering* and *re-turning* (Barad, 2017) to the poverty, the hopeless,

and the larger sociopolitical and economic discourses that became part of his *everyday*.

(be)come. The openness and uncertainty here are important in that they echo the active critique of the normativity (Deleuze, 1968; Derrida, 1972; St. Pierre, 2021) and the *everyday* (Lefebvre, 1987, 1988), and thus make it possible for us to question and act against the (re)production of damaging practices so that more people might thrive. We might ask, for example: how can we handle a random conversation at a restaurant so that the everyday CLP and the collaborative (be)coming-together can be possible? What do some of the certificates, awards, and visual-textual representations in a public space *do* to our body, actions, and ways of knowing? What can we *do* with them?

Last, I would like to note that although this paper addresses a wide range of sociopolitical issues with a strong critical stance, it is written from a place of love rather than hate. It is the love we all have for the place where we were born and raised, the people we grew up with, the caring, comforting hands that once reached out to us, and the strangers we walked past in our everyday. With this form of love, I believe that all forms of justice-oriented works can go beyond the classroom context, extending to our everyday lives, everyday social practices, in the past, at the present, and in the future.

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