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The Capaciousness of No: Affective Refusals as Literacy Practices

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ABSTRACT

The authors considered the capacious feeling that emerges from saying no to literacy practices, and the affective potential of saying no *as* a literacy practice. The authors highlight the affective possibilities of saying no to normative understandings of literacy, thinking with a series of vignettes in which children, young people, and teachers refused literacy practices in different ways. The authors use the term *capacious* to signal possibilities that are as yet unthought: a sense of broadening and opening out through enacting no. The authors examined how attention to affect ruptures humanist logics that inform normative approaches to literacy. Through attention to nonconscious, noncognitive, and transindividual bodily forces and capacities, affect deprivileges the human as the sole agent in an interaction, thus disrupting measurements of who counts as a literate subject and what counts as a literacy event. No is an affective moment. It can signal a pushback, an absence, or a silence. As a theoretical and methodological way of thinking/feeling with literacy, affect proposes problems rather than solutions, countering solution-focused research in which the resistance is to be overcome, co-opted, or solved. Affect operates as a crack or a chink, a tiny ripple, a barely perceivable gesture, that can persist and, in doing so, hold open the possibility for alternative futures.

In this article, we consider the affective potential that emerges from saying no to literacy practices, and the affective potential of saying no *as* a literacy practice. We drew on our fieldwork in diverse social and geographical contexts to attune to the different registers of no, including a teacher who quit ("No, not like this"), a child who was silent ("No, not now"), and a student who refused to write ("No, not here"). Thinking beyond no as a problem to be solved, we considered the capaciousness of saying no. By this, we mean that rather than closing down or reducing possibilities, moments of no can create a lot of space: to draw a breath, to open out and open up the potential for something else to happen. No can conserve energy, and it can preserve privacy.

As cis-hetero, white, enabled academics, predominantly from middle-class backgrounds and all educated at Oxbridge or red brick–level institutions in our various countries, we are aware that we write from a position of privilege. Further, each of the projects in this study was funded by national-level grants. We have encountered many yeses to be able to think about no in the ways that we put forth in this article. As such, we are cognizant of not wanting to fetishize no but attend to the affect that no generates as prompts for further thought.

We argue that affect circulates through, between, and around the refusal to comply with normative understandings of literacy practices, which, in many instances, remain tethered to a humanist, Western-centric, and patriarchal logic. There is frequently something excessive about no. We present vignettes as spaces to think within, to provide glimpses of the space of no and what it could be. We see the literacies of no not as owned by individuals but as affectively circulating among students, practitioners, and researchers, hinting at the affective and speculative potential of no. This is not to say that, as a group of researchers, we speak with one voice; affect does not result in a unison chorus but rather a polyphonic rendering of readings and meanings that stems from our own diachronic experiences. As we open up the spaces of no, then, we attempt to show, while writing in concert, resistance to a homogenized position or single agreement. Thinking about the affective and capacious potential of literacies of no requires that we move beyond new categories or descriptions for literacy events, or even new ways of rethinking the notion of social literacy, and acknowledge that for each individual, the spaces offered by "no" literacies will be different and uniquely impact practices and understandings. We begin by unpacking, nuancing, and describing the intersection between New Literacy Studies and theories of affect. We then give a brief summary of affect theory, which we argue can rupture humanist logics that continue to undergird conceptualizations of literacies through an attention to more-than-personal, excessive feelings and their potentials.

The Field of Literacy

New Literacy Studies conceptualizes literacy as a social practice, often realized through ethnographic encounters with script and oral language (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1993b). Its initial radical promise was that literacies were not skills-based sets of practices associated with schooling but could be found anywhere: on walls, within homes, and in communities. These literacies often went unrecognized, located in communities where it was presumed that there was no literacy. Street (1993b) argued that "the recognition of these problems was a major impulse behind the development of an alternative model of literacy that could provide a more theoretically sound and ethnographic understanding of the actual significance of literacy practices in people's lives" (p. 7).

Street's (1993a) edited book acted as an explicit challenge to Western-centric notions of what counted as literacy, by highlighting overlooked literacy practices and by challenging the assumption that literacy practices were universal, capable of being abstracted from and working independently of place and community. For Street, the problem of recognition is illustrated by the Buddhist story of the turtle and the fish:

There was once a turtle that lived in a lake with a group of fish. One day the turtle went for a walk on dry land. He was away from the lake for a few weeks. When he returned he met some of the fish. The fish asked him, "Mister turtle, hello! How are you? We have not seen you for a few weeks. Where have you been?" The turtle said, "I was spending some time on dry land." The fish were a little puzzled and they said, "Up on dry land? What are you talking about? What is this dry land? Is it wet?" The turtle said, "No it is not." "Is it cool and refreshing?" "No it is not." "Can you swim in it?" "No you can't." The fish said, "It is not wet, it is not cool, there are no waves, you can't swim in it. Don't tell us what it is not, tell us what is." "I can't," said the turtle, "I don't have any language to describe it." (Nirantar, 2007, pp. 11–12)

From this story, we learned that

an ethnographic perspective shifts us out of this mindset and helps us firstly to 'imagine' things that do not exist in our own world, and then to understand them on their own terms rather than to see them within our terms, as simply deficit. (Nirantar, 2007 p. 12)

Here, we want to dwell with Street's notion of "no" literacy and the problem of using words to describe something according to what it is not. Turning to the turtle and the fish story, we wonder not only about practices that are defined by what they are not but also about what happens when language itself falls short in terms of its capacity to adequately describe what is important in a given situation. Sometimes, language is required to describe a practice, to explain it, to give it a rationale, to respond, and to draw others into a new way of seeing the world. However, at other times, what is important is not capable of being articulated in words, and significance lies instead in the silences, the gaps, the refusal to perform, the missing data, and the things that are left unsaid or said differently.

The notion of something within literacy practices that exceeds representation, or cannot be easily explained in words, was discussed by Leander and Boldt (2013), who drew on Deleuze and Guattari to critique the overemphasis on logic and intent within conceptualizations of literacy practices. Leander and Boldt argued that a vision of literacy as "the design of texts to achieve already-known goals…projected onto students as the trajectory of their activities" (p. 28) overemphasizes human intentionality and misses "literacy's ability to participate in unruly ways" (p. 41). In the same year, MacLure (2013) wrote about language in a similar vein, pointing out that the frequent conflation of words with language loses the bodily material nature of language, including language's wild elements that refuse representation.

New materialist, posthuman, and inhuman thinking alerted researchers to the unspoken, nonrepresentational aspects of literacy studies and affect (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Ehret, 2018; Hackett & Somerville, 2017; Kuby, Gutshall Rucker, & Kirchhofer, 2015; Truman, 2016) and helped develop a more nuanced recognition of things that

did not necessarily make sense. Yearning to grasp, or at least to begin to be able to account for, the unruly and wild within literacy practices, scholars increasingly have turned to posthumanism and Deleuzian theories, with a sense that the ways in which New Literacy Studies, multi-literacies, and multimodality have defined literacies was not enough (Lenters, 2016), that something was missed (Leander & Boldt, 2013). As Ehret and Leander (2019) put it, "where did life go?" (p. 8).

Affect theory brings to light the difficulty of representing what is felt. As Boldt (2019) observed, "so much of this occurs in non-symbolized forms, through flows of affect, a sudden and perhaps fleeting awareness of reciprocity and mutual recognition" (p. 40). Affective literacies were always there, lying at the edges of ethnographic explorations until researchers bumped up against them as they moved through the world, prompting a greater consideration of, for example, sensations within bodies and what remains inarticulable, how people felt as they gestured in the sand, stretched out to do a drawing, or enacted the sweep of a pen on paper.

Complicating the Humanism of Literacies

Scholars of color have critiqued the whiteness of literacies for decades (Kinloch, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Richardson, 2006), including the role of literacy in othering and colonizing practices (Stanley, 2016; Tarc, 2015; Viruru, 2012). In our various research, we have turned to affect theory, feminist new materialist, Indigenous, and critical race scholarship to help us make sense of literacies that are both sensible and nonsensible, material and immaterial (Burnett, Merchant, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2014; Tarc, 2015). Although this scholarship is not to be conflated, it has helped us dislodge literacy from its humanist framework. We are grateful to Tuck (2010), Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2019), and others who have resituated knowledge production practices away from the powerful raced and classed discourses of the global north academics. This is important because, as Tarc (2015) contended, we cannot "continue to practice literacy without thinking about the dominant forms of life it produces" (p. 130). In this section, we unpack the humanism of literacies, which we see as a connecting thread between the diverse literature discussed so far and the tension lying at the heart of the project to account for affect within literacy studies.

To conceptualize the affective potential of saying no as a literacy practice, we drew on Simpson's (2016) significant work on refusal to comply with settler colonial logics in research settings. Refusal for Simpson is a way of moving away from resistance, which she noted is overinscribed with control structures or domination. Instead of functioning from a position of being against a dominating structure, "refusal offers its own structure of apprehension that maintains and produces sociality through time" (p. 329). Our work for this article was an attempt to read literacy from the position of no, to see where, affectively, no could lead us in an attempt to reconceptualize what literacy could be. It was both a speculative and a tautological endeavor.

Scholars of postcolonialism, anti-racism, and literacy have drawn attention to the intertwining of literacy practices with colonialism and civilizing of non-Western groups (Nxumalo & Rubin, 2019; Tarc, 2015; Viruru, 2012). Literacy scholars working with affect and the posthumanities have also explored how literacies operate within a humanist logic (Kuby, Spector, & Thiel, 2019; Snaza, 2019; Snaza & Weaver, 2015; Truman, 2019a). By this, we mean that what counts as literate, literacy, or literature is governed by values associated with European humanism that reinforce the human or Man as the dominant form of life (Snaza & Weaver, 2015; Wynter, 2003). Historically, humanism has been linked to the European Enlightenment, wherein enlightened thinkers turned away from medieval theocracy and exerted the right to make rational decisions about the world and exert dominion around the globe. Aristotle's notion of an animacy schema has been linked to the construction of the human (Chen, 2012), in which the white, enabled, cis-hetero male is at the top of the pyramid of animacy, and other bodies (e.g., blacks, females, queers, the disabled, animals, plants, rocks) are seen as less than human (Springgay & Truman, 2017). The ideals of humanism rely on the exclusion of nonhuman others and are inextricably linked with transatlantic slavery, continuing settler colonialism, and white monoculture (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Wynter, 2003; Yusoff, 2018). As Mignolo (2011) put forth, modernity depends on coloniality. Humanist ideals of rationalism and freedom from theocracy came at the price of rendering others nonhuman. As Jackson (2016) put forth, slavery was not maintained through merely denying humanity to black slaves but through an enforced formlessness or plasticity of their humanity. For Jackson, the plasticity of humanity referred to how, within the hierarchy of the great chain of being, slaves were deemed human enough to be treated humanely under the laws of slavery that continued to subjugate slaves, yet the practice of slavery itself was not incongruous with humanist ideals.

Since the founding of *studia humanitatis*, the Renaissance humanism–inspired school curriculum, literacy and education more broadly have operated within a humanist mode in the West and in places that Western imperial forces have invaded and colonized (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). This manifests through ongoing practices of excluding those who do not fit into a humanist logic (and deeming them illiterate) or rehabilitating some (making them literate enough) to function within the system. An example of how this logic operates is the

Canadian Residential School System, which used the practices of civilizing Indigenous people through literacy practices (Stanley, 2016). The overrepresentation of white, cis-hetero, male authors and characters in literary texts used in the school curriculum demonstrates the figure of humanity that is deemed universal and valued in countries such as Australia, England, and Wales, where we conducted the research discussed in this article. The endorsement of white, Western, middle-class child socialization practices, such as talking directly to preverbal babies, as natural, neutral, and essential to child development (Avineri et al., 2015), and allegiance to white linguistic norms as more appropriate for academic contexts (Flores & Rosa, 2015) are further examples of literacy education operating as a humanist project.

Something different is needed in order for the field of literacies to escape its humanist logic. Although a rich body of work has stressed unrecognized literacy knowledges and competency of children and young people, it is important to continue to interrogate against which (or whose) standards knowledge and competency are defined and measured. For example, as Moje et al. (2004) noted, much work drawing on community literacies to mingle with schooled literacies has traditionally been seen as a way of addressing the literacy competency curriculum, yet it has not addressed the underlying issues of hierarchies of literacies within schooling. The term *competency*, for example, alludes to efficiency or success in carrying out a task or completing a goal. As such, it carries the fingerprints of logic and rationality. If arguments for unrecognized knowledges and competencies continue to sit within a humanist logic, the effect is a continued upholding of an existing world order, albeit with the increased possibility of inclusion into that order for some. As Springgay and Truman (2018b) highlighted, the problem with the notion of inclusion is that although it purports to promote diversity and equity, inclusion regularly "operates as a symbolic gesture that fails to undo the structural logics of racism, ableism, homophobia, and settler colonialism" (p. 13).

Wynter (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015) compared the dominant, universalizing approach to education to Roman Empire builders, offering citizenship status to selected natives who, in return, would invest and uphold a particular (Roman) mode of being in the world. Truman's (2019a) framing of Wynter's (2003) concept of Man as the epitome of a literate subject, against which others are measured, is grounded in a critique of Western humanism that posits knowing as connected to a certain type of literacy: a literacy that is white and rational, schooled and sensible. Such a capital-*L* literacy is not one that is found on walks, scratched on bedsteads, stuffed under furniture, or enacted in gesture, sound, and drawing (Leander & Boldt, 2013; Pahl, 2002). The shadow of rationality, logic, and intent (Leander & Boldt, 2013) continues to haunt

literacy studies, despite the strong orientation of the field toward social equity, racial justice, and inclusive pedagogies. This complexity was discussed in a review essay by Gadsden and Harris (2009), who argued that for African American youth, literacy itself becomes a definitional concern, because when discussing vernacular literacies, "not all of these literacy forms fit neatly into common definitions of literacy" (p. 199). Here, literacy takes up no as a counterpoint to the humanist yes and becomes a site of resistance.

Embracing Affect

Affect theory offers significant potential to rupture humanist logics. Through attention to nonconscious, noncognitive, and transindividual bodily forces and capacities, affect deprivileges the human as the sole agent in an interaction, thus disrupting measurements of who counts as a literate subject and what counts as a literacy event. What has been called the affective turn has signaled the need and the means to theorize the social beyond the discursive, to decenter humanism and move away from representationalist thought (Clough, 2007). A variety of academic lineages have conceptualized affect in different ways. Many scholars of affect conducting empirical work in the social sciences have drawn from the tradition of Spinoza, wherein affect can be described as the capacities of bodies to act or be acted on by other bodies (Massumi, 2002). In this regard, affect might be partially understood as the forces (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010) at work in an encounter, that build and debilitate capacity as part of a relational exchange. Such affective capacities are coproduced through intensities, proximities, and viscosities circulating between, through, and transversal to individual bodies and are sometimes generated as what Stewart (2011) called atmospheres.

These definitions of affect might begin to sound abstract, and because of the tendency to ascribe affect to prepersonal sensations or circulations between bodies, some theorizations of affect may appear to erase identity and become apolitical. Significantly, affect theory has been critiqued for neglecting to account for intersectional considerations, such as race, and an inability to engage with issues of oppression and the "politics of lives and liveliness" (Lara et al., 2017, p. 33). As Truman and Shannon (2018) wrote, "when affect is depoliticized and assumes a neutral circulation, as well as (state-sanctioned) capacity for affectation, it masks its conflation of neutral *as white*" (p. 62). Critical scholars in the field of affect studies have noted that within the swirling production of capacity, atmospheres, or intensities, affect not only circulates between bodies but also sticks (Ahmed, 2004) to particular bodies, such as racialized, gendered, poor, queer, and dis/abled bodies onto whom capacity and debility are

always already written (Puar, 2017). In conversation with Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*, Ahmed (2004) wrote, "we may walk into a room and 'feel the atmosphere,' but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival" (p. 37). Angles might include intersectional markers such as gender, religion, race, and ability that shift in different circumstances.

Massumi (2002) distinguished between affect and emotion, wherein an emotion is affect that has become personalized and named happy or sad. In contrast, Ahmed (2004) theorized affect through critical discourses of emotion, arguing that emotions are activated on the surfaces of bodies, structuring how bodies are lived and felt. In our uptake of affect in this article, particularly when dealing with people refusing or saying no as practices of literacy, the relations among the personal, prepersonal, affect, and emotion are constantly shifting. In our reading, affect is both personal and more than personal and draws attention to "intensities that pass body to body" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1) and "the becoming sensation, a force or intensity manifested at the surface of the body" (Springgay & Zaliwska, 2017, pp. 276–277). This intensity and force can build or diminish in different circumstances, affecting a body's capacity to act. Animacy hierarchies are linked to taxonomies of affect (Chen, 2012) or economies of affect (Ahmed, 2004) that work through exclusionary logics to dehumanize particular bodies. These taxonomies and economies of affect work like atmospheres: regulating particular bodies, rendering some bodies toxic, other bodies illiterate, other bodies disposable, other bodies overaffected, and still other bodies not affected at all (Palmer, 2017). As such, queer, feminist, critical disability, critical race, and qualitative researchers have prioritized the necessity of attending to intersectional markers and the affective intensities that circulate within literacy events (Truman, 2019a). Following Puar (2012), who put forth the productive potential of holding seemingly incommensurate lines of thought frictionally, or what Springgay and Truman (2018a) called (in)tension, we attend in this article to intersectional concerns of identity and representation in literacy settings and the circulation, capacity-building, and/or debilitating features of affect.

"No" Literacies and the Literacies of No

In this section, we think with affect in connection with literacy practices. We do this in two registers: First, we highlight the affective potential of saying no to normative understandings of literacy, and second, we examine how attention to affect might rupture humanist logics that inform normative approaches to literacy. No as a mode of thought has many potentialities; it moves across registers and can mean many things. What is distinctive about literacies of no is that it leads us into a not-ness that is nonrepresentational, because the word *no* instantiates a refusal to do words and to do literacy. Our work, as we illustrate in the vignettes in the next section, highlights the importance of no as a way of tracing language prescriptivism practices that deny literacy to those who refuse to spell correctly, write correctly, or speak correctly. No is an affective moment. It can signal a pushback, an absence, or a silence.

Dutro (2019) suggested that affect theory offers the "critical potential to make more tangibly available the visceral stakes of the political in classrooms" (p. 74). Drawing on affect theory, we sought to further explore what we might learn, not only about spaces and gestures that appear from a Western-centric position to have no literacy but also to focus on what we term *literacies of no*. We also recognize how mainstream conceptualizations of literacies continue to sideline those who do not adopt middle-class ways of communicating and are consequently deemed less literate (Grainger, 2013; McClean 2019; Morrell, 2008). We build our understanding of no in conversation with approaches to literacy that acknowledge the power of the deliberate silence, such as of preservice teachers of color where "revealing one's whole self was full of risk while remaining silent allowed them to safeguard their most personal beliefs and ideologies" (Haddix, 2012, p. 175). When being the humanized literate subject requires students to strip themselves of their respective cultures to achieve academic success, many might decide that their group or community identification is worth more than identifying with a school that does not value them for who they are and what they know (Delpit, 2006). For some students, such decisions are unconscious or intuitive; for other students, they represent active resistance (Kohl, 1994).

Kulick and Stroud (2003) described how villagers in Papua New Guinea resisted Western missionary literacy practices by refusing to read or write, instead taking hold of literacy practices that they themselves found useful. Finnegan (2015) pointed out that "language, not least in the extensive projects of biblical translation, was a primary vehicle in the missionary conversion process and crucial for the civilizing vision of the West" (p. 18). She put forth instead a need to rethink parameters for communication, as "the once-hard concept of 'writing' has turned into something more fluid and unstable" (p. 22). Within this instability and indeterminacy, beyond the verbal and inside affective dimensions, lie the literacies of no.

Vignettes: Attuning to the Registers of No

The term *vignette*, derived from the French *vin* (vine) that framed early photographs, was later used to describe photographs themselves and, even later still, to describe short but evocative pieces of writing. We put forth vignettes as

"efficient, and potentially poignant ways to articulate affective experiences" (Truman, 2014, p. 89) in our research sites. In keeping with nonrepresentational thought (Thrift, 2007; Vannini, 2015) inspired by affect theory, the vignettes are not intended to be representations of research findings but as more than representational probes for further thought inspired by affective moments (MacLure, 2013; McCormack, 2008; Truman, 2016). We offer four vignettes—a teacher who quit in their first year, a silent child, a poet who refused to write, and crumpled paper in a bin—in conversation with one another, across different countries, time-spaces, and research projects. In dialogue with the vignettes, we ask, How can no offer more capacious frontiers for literacy educators to work within? This is something we ask ourselves as we move through the many spaces of no that we have found in our research studies. The vignettes offer ways into the conversation, heuristics for our own process of affective understandings, residues and traces of our research practice, residing both within and outside of us.

Vignette 1: Lee

Lee, a queer, nonbinary, Jewish teacher in their first year of teaching English

Someone painted a swastika on the school wall, right outside the classroom.

"I was trying to teach [Harper Lee's] *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you know the idea of people having agency to try and address systemic issues."

Departmental processes in the school delayed the removal of the graffiti.

"The principal sort of wanted to see it as an isolated incident. It was there for months. With that there…it was just too much."

Lee left teaching English after one year.

Vignette 2: Beth

Beth, 2 years old, in her first term at nursery school

Playing outside, in nursery rubber boots and waterproofs, clutching her own sparkly trainers close to her chest

The children sit in a circle to sing the hello song.

Bright sun causes eyes to squint.

"Hello, everyone, how are you? Hello, everyone, who's sitting next to you?" sings the teacher.

Beth sits in silence, swinging her rubber booted feet.

"What's your name, Beth?" prompts the teacher.

Amid the sound of the wind and rustling waterproof suits, Beth presses her lips closed, silent.

As the song continues on, Beth whispers her name to herself, under her breath.

Vignette 3: Abida

Abida, a black Muslim girl in English class, refuses to write.

"I want to write about race but don't want to write about race."

Begins her poem, rips it up, the sound tearing through the class

Folds her arms

The other students turn and stare.

Time passes. Now third week of Ramadan

All the other students complete their poems, peer-edit them, and type them up.

"I want chips and a falafel wrap, and a nice cold juice
To lay somewhere with a bit more wind where water—a stream or the ocean passes by"

"I can't write at school. I can't write it."

Vignette 4: Bin

Four white 9- and 10-year-olds in a classroom

The brief: to make a film responding to the question, What do they think is important about spelling?

They film the story of a boss who tears up a job application because it is badly spelled.

The boss shouts in the face of the rejected applicant, stuffs the paper down the applicant's shirt.

They all laugh as the applicant plays at angrily tearing the paper out from his shirt.

Moves faster.

Throws the paper into a wastepaper bin. It CLANGS to the floor.

The moment stills and turns sour. Loud CLANGS are not usually permitted in the classroom.

They make another film. One planned to be less noisy.

The applicant never meets the boss. His application is calmly put into the bin by the boss with little explanation. Someone else gets the job; they are overjoyed.

The group is pleased with the film; they all feel that it is good, that it shows what would happen to adults.

The vignettes are not exceptional and have a mundanity (Stewart, 2007) that may well be familiar to the reader. Yet, at the same time, they are specific. They have stayed with us personally and have become a meeting place for us as educators and researchers as we have grappled with the question of affect and the politics of inclusion and exclusion within literacy practices. Affect is slippery, atmospheric, and asks us to reckon with emotion and the geopolitical contexts in which affect is produced (Dutro, 2019). In this section, we think with the vignettes and offer some context in which the studies were situated, and situate ourselves across these contexts. Although all of us as researchers are captivated and moved by the vignettes, and we wrote this article as a group, the vignettes do not, cannot, resonate affectively with each of us in the same way. As stated earlier, affect can glide past particular bodies and land on others. Perhaps intersectional markers such as gender, race, and sexual orientation come into play, perhaps a certain mood that day, or our investment in a particular site or idea. As researchers who are all embedded in different time-spaces, methodologies, and countries, something different is at stake for each of us in relation to affect and literacy. As such, there is plurality to our perspectives, and we offer the following as an analysis in concert, rather than as a synthesis. We explore the vignettes in an attempt to demonstrate how they prompted us to frictionally feel and think together about the affective capaciousness of no.

Lee's story (vignette 1) was collected from interview transcripts as part of a four-year longitudinal Australian research project, Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers, which tracks early-career English teachers' changing understandings of the role and purpose of literature in the English content area. Larissa (fourth author) is chief investigator on the project and also has some responsibility for English teacher preparation at her institution. Inhabiting these different roles, she was affectively confronted by the ways in which Lee's refusal offered insight into how school literate practices, around and through the classroom, are not being driven by teachers.

Sarah (first author), a dual citizen of both Canada and the United Kingdom, had recently joined the project as a research fellow. Notably, Sarah was not present when Lee was interviewed, but was affectively struck by reading the interview transcript in which Lee details the events surrounding the swastika and other factors that led to their leaving teaching so early in their career. Lee's interview transcripts center on the ways in which the environment where Lee was expected to teach literature consistently undermined their practice. Lee mentions the rise in white nationalist sentiments circulating around the globe and how the atmosphere generated by a swastika hurt them personally as a queer Jewish person. The symbol of the swastika that the school was unable to remove quickly due to "departmental processes" also resonated with Lee's curricular requirements of teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While not conflating antisemitism with black experiences of racism, teaching the text alongside news reports of emboldened white supremacy and a swastika on the school wall demonstrated how systems of power and oppression reinforce each other across networks scholastically, politically, and interpersonally. Highlighting the power differentials of a classroom, de Freitas (2012) argued that even inanimate objects are "active mediators in a social material network" (p. 593), yet affect is always relational, and the mediation of certain objects can be experienced by different bodies in different ways, depending on "the angle of our arrival" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 37). The swastika, culturally appropriated from Buddhism and Hinduism in central Asia by the Nazis and now used to signify white supremacy around the globe, is an extremely charged symbol. As an actor, or what Latour would call an actant, in a social material network, the swastika has affective, material effects on Lee personally and as a teacher in the classroom and broader school community.

Where affect circulates, who and what it clings to and how it is experienced differ across bodies (Ahmed, 2004). These differentials can draw intensity and significance from community and biographical histories, even those that lie beyond the personal experience of the individual. Ways of making sense of, or orienting to, the world can remain largely unarticulated yet still carry a deep

and powerful capacity to affect bodies (Ivinson, 2018; Walkerdine, 2016). Abi (second author), an early-career researcher carrying out her first postdoctoral research project, collected Beth's story (vignette 2) as part of a two-year ethnographic study, The Emergence of Literacy in Very Young Children. Abi visited the nursery, located in a former coal mining community, regularly for deep hanging out (Powell & Sommerville, 2018) with the children and staff, collecting field notes and small video clips. In Beth's community, since the closure of the pit, many families have experienced long-term unemployment.

The stories of poor physical and mental health, family breakdown, poverty, and low educational achievement in a postindustrial community are familiar, particularly for Abi, who had worked in community outreach in similar communities before beginning as a researcher. The hello song was a frequent and popular part of the nursery routine, delivered as part of a government-approved scheme of phonetic skills for young children. This program of adult-led engagement for children from the age of 2 is intended to enable staff to measure and develop young children's language competencies against developmental trajectories that, although presented as neutral and natural, work to uphold white, Western child socialization practices as a gold standard (Avineri et al., 2015). Writing in the context of postindustrial working-class communities (e.g., the one to which Beth belongs), Ivinson (2018) described the significance of affective ways of knowing and being in the world to these communities. These ways of being are drawn from specific community biographies of loss and struggle, ways of knowing that are "less available for linguistic regulation" (Bernstein, as cited in Ivinson, 2018, p. 543) and are manifested in language practices that rely on insider knowledge and the significance of that which remains unspoken. In contrast to these home language practices, Beth now found herself attending nursery school specifically as part of a national scheme to address a perceived lack (of language skills, of parenting skills, and of child development) assumed to reside in her community. The request to speak, on cue and with clear articulation, we argue, might have a different kind of affective intensity for Beth. This affective intensity could never be proven or solved; it will always elude measurement or rational explanation.

Morrell (2017) argued that unless we reconceptualize literacy, we will be unable to fully recognize the children who participate in literacy practices in different ways. Abida's story (vignette 3) was collected as part of a four-month sensory ethnographic study of the relation between walking and creative writing practices in English literature class. Sarah was both the teacher and the researcher on the project, which took place in a middle-class neighborhood in Wales. Twice a week, 18 students from five different classes and levels were extracted from their regular English classes and formed a new class outside, where they walked,

wrote, and collaborated on the research project. Abida contributed significantly to the project and participated in each class, creating video poems, speculative writings, sensory maps using literary devices, and various other tasks that were set. However, when the task was presented to walk through the city and compose a poem on contemporary injustices modeled on William Blake's poem "London," Abida tried at first and then refused to write. At this point, the ethnography was in its third month. Abida, the other students, and Sarah had a good working relationship. Sarah was in the position as a teacher and researcher not to force Abida to write, while recognizing that this is not always the case for teachers when deadlines and standardized tests or assessments need to be met. Abida continued to refuse to write the poem for several weeks, although she completed other tasks. Ramadan began, and her reason for refusing to write the poem changed. She cited being too hungry/thirsty to work due to fasting: Abida's refusal affected other students, and many of them wrote about her in their own notes.

In many classroom settings, Abida's refusal to perform her task might have resulted in her being placed in after-school detention, with a note home to her parents, or in a remedial program for students with behavioral problems. In such classrooms, literacy manifests because assent is a form of compliance, as a yes to the rationale or white space of humanism. It is social, and the social is always framed as positive, or good. Thus, saying no can lead to coercion in the form of being on report or getting told off in class. Ahmed (2017) described how a critique of will-fulness is frequently leveled at women, people of color, children, and anyone whom normative society deems should not have a will of their own. Writing about ease, Ahmed described how individuals who refuse would find ease and rest if only they would willingly give up their will and, in Abida's case, write now. We understand her refusal to write as a literacy practice and as work. She was not working on the specific task in a normative way, but her refusal was work. Sarah as teacher and researcher, unconstrained by normative assessment procedures, had the time and space to dwell with Abida and her refusal, just as we have had time and space to ponder her refusal as literacy work while writing this paper.

Abida's story takes place in Brexit era Britain, where discourses and debates have filled the media and mundane public spaces with vitriolic rhetoric and a demonstrable rise in hate crimes against people of color, specifically Muslims, and the LGBTQ+ community. Brexit's affect is sticky, attaching itself to different bodies in different ways (Ahmed, 2004). Part of the research study looked at how different bodies move through space and how walking as a method of gathering inspiration needed to be understood through an intersectional lens. During the months of this research project, Abida noted how walking on the street was statistically becoming more dangerous for a person of color like her who wear hijab. In a geopolitical tide of white supremacist violence, she was taking her classroom writing task very seriously, although a cursory analysis at her behavior might have interpreted her as a troublesome student refusing to just get on with her work.

The account of four students making a film (vignette 4) shows what happens if someone chooses to refuse or cannot adequately participate in discourses of correctness, and the felt experience of being refused by these discourses. The job application narrative emerged from a project called Language as Talisman, situated in the context of a postindustrial area in Northern England, an area where the loss of the coal and steel-making industries has led to long-term unemployment. The project was concerned with the need to recognize everyday language in communities. Kate (third author) led the Language as Talisman project, and Hugh (fifth author) was the researcher on the project. They worked in a school where the inspectorate regime, Ofsted, had commented (negatively) that the teachers and students did not speak with a received British accent, instead using their own dialect. The school staff were keen to explore with the research team the ways in which Standard English, including spelling, was understood by the students and the implications of this understanding. Hugh worked directly with a small group of students to explore the nature of language and the implications of correct spelling on their futures (Escott & Pahl, 2019).

A group of students was encouraged to explore what spelling means to them through film. Their films simulate what possibilities emerge for individuals who cannot spell correctly, recognizing the inescapable impact that literacy practices have on life, through felt and embodied understandings of discourses of correctness. The films trace how not being able to spell means that you have less value: less value as a worker, a citizen, and more significantly, as a person. The chaos of the first film affectively recognizes how the myth of good spelling and grammar, as a neutral skill related to a meritocratic job market, is inscribed on people's bodies in humiliating ways. The film shows an embodied understanding of how prescriptivist ideologies informing spelling practices construct those who are not correct: as someone who provokes (good-natured or malicious) humor or chastisement; as someone who will be angry, disappointed, and confused by rejection; as a person who understands that if you cannot spell correctly, you invite poor treatment toward yourself and are individually responsible for this; that spelling properly, and accepting any humiliations involved in coming to spell correctly, is part of becoming an adult. In the first film, the group revel in the possibilities that refusal of a person's attempt at correctness affords, playing up the authority and violence of the boss and improvising with the feelings of anger and rejection that the applicant experiences. The laughter, physical

violence, and chaos were written out of the story in the final film, but in both versions, the students explored spelling in relation to feelings of anger, confusion, and disappointment. They were satisfied with their final film, as it shows how things would or should be. Yet, the previous film traced an embodied understanding of how discourses of correctness justify symbolic and physical violence toward, and mistreatment of, individuals. The students comment in the films on the reality of their lives (poor spelling means poor job chances), affectively tracing how notions of correctness construct them.

Discussion

> When I write or speak about desire, I am trying to get out from underneath the ways that my communities and I are always depicted. (Tuck & Ree, 2013/2016, p. 648)

The affective intensities that stick to individuals and communities in the vignettes discussed in the previous section might easily be dismissed by the educational machine and its incontrovertible truths about what works: where individuals should just speak when prompted, teach in the buildings provided, and write in the time allocated or be subject to remediation and reform. How, then, does affect, and its tendency to elude being pinned down or adequately articulated, achieve a leakiness and persistence that evade being explained away? Writing in the context of settler colonialism in North America, Tuck and Ree (2013/2016) pointed out that damage narratives are frequently told about certain communities as a way of containing them. Desire narratives, in contrast, foreground complexity and contradiction, a recognition of communities thriving despite suffering (Tuck & Ree, 2013/2016). Refusal can have a role to play, then, in both rejecting the damage narrative and refusing to endorse the right of the dominant to choose the framework and tell the story in the first place. For example, writing about abstention from the Israeli army, Weiss (2016) explained that a public refusal, a clear no, would "be claimed and co-opted by the state" (p. 352), such as through tests of autonomy, where lack or pathology is used to explain away the refusal. Answering yes or no in itself becomes "an explicit recognition of the state's right to request consent" (p. 353), hence the popularity, in this context, of other means of avoiding conscription. Thinking about damage narratives and the risk of no being co-opted and interpreted in unintended ways, it is clear that both participation and certain kinds of resistance to participation in literacy practices risk validating the frameworks against which one's participation is being measured, serving to lend evidence and truth to damage narratives about individuals and communities. Bringing this scholarship into dialogue with the story of the turtle and the fish at the start of this article, we see refusal operating both as a rejection of describing

practices according to what they are not (i.e., not adult Western literacy practices) and as the potential of abstention, through silence or averting the eyes, for example, as an affirmative investment of energy in something else. "'Tell us what it is,'" demanded the fish. "'I can't,'" replied the turtle, at least not in terms that you are able or prepared to hear.

In Beth's case, for example, the very existence of the free nursery places scheme and the drive to extract Beth from her community and indoctrinate her into alternative, more explicated and more abstracted forms of language are all grounded in assumptions of lack, deprivation, and the risk that these things potentially pose to her school readiness. Working-class language practices that tend toward what Bernstein called restricted codes (Ivinson, 2018) have long been criticized as inadequate for child socialization (see Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989), inappropriate for school (see Heath, 1983), animal-like and barely human (see MacLure, 2016), and the cause of poverty itself (Field, 2010). From this perspective, Beth's engagement in mainstream early-years language exercises such as the hello song from any other starting position than lack and remediation would be impossible. The ways in which she simultaneously participated in (by sitting in the circle) and refused her role in the hello song (by pressing her lips together) are important to the ways in which affective refusal unfolds. When children in early childcare settings overtly break the rules, processes of special intervention and a search for lack, blame, or explanation tend to begin. Resistance can validate the existing structure, rendering the individual subject to judgment within that structure (Weiss, 2016). Beth's refusal is something else: a tiny ripple that calls into question assumptions that are sitting heavily in this space. The mundanity of sitting silently when requested to speak, but whispering her name a few moments later, shifts the atmosphere in subtle and unpredictable ways, catching up other bodies in its affective flows (Stewart, 2007). A moment of silence, of averting the eyes (Weiss, 2016) from what is demanded, rippled the surface of a seemingly predictable and clearly defined situation. Literacies of no are capacious because they can hold open the possibility for some as-yet-unknown alternative.

In the case of the group making the bin film, a narrative about the straightforward consequences of failing to acquire mainstream literacy practices was cocreated through literacies, language practices, affective qualities, and objects. There is something ironic about a straightforward story about the importance of spelling being created through a complexity of meaning making that is often disregarded or devalued by mainstream models of literacy and prescriptivist ideologies about language (see Escott & Pahl, 2019). On one level, the overall narrative of the film conveys what the students have been taught to understand about spelling: that being a good speller leads

to getting a good job. The final film describes a world in which correctness is rewarded. The codified English spelling system, itself a product of middle-class social practices, becomes the measuring stick by which regional and social spoken variation in language is judged (Clark, 2013). The complexities and potentials of orthographic sign making are reduced to benchmarks that certify whether students have enough competency, and the perceived stability of Standard English orthography is used to perpetuate notions of correctness that delimit who or what is seen as valuable. The cultural value associated with this form of orthography is "a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices" (Agha, 2003, p. 232), a crustlike sediment that formed over time, and is now inherited by those coming to spelling in the present, with little opportunity for young people to be involved in reassessing this cultural value.

At the same time as being positioned as lacking, and frequently described in terms of what they are not, the individuals and communities in our vignettes are also considered capable of being known, explained, and solved through social science research (Burman, Aono, & Muramoto, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014). As Tuck and Yang (2014) pointed out, refusal is important for indicating to those in power what is off-limits, "that there are publics and ethical life beyond the state, in places that the state cannot reach" (Weiss, 2016, p. 357). We return here, then, to the capaciousness of no. For Tuck and Ree (2013/2016), complexity and contradiction in desire narratives are important for keeping community knowledge private and unavailable for co-opting into damage narratives by the dominant. "I care more about concealing parts of myself from you. I don't trust you very much" (Tuck & Ree, 2013/2016, p. 640).

Refusal in the form of averting the eyes (Weiss, 2016) can be capacious in that it keeps things unavailable to outsiders, unreachable by researching and educating machines that seek to measure, benchmark, and make knowable literacy practices in communities. Perhaps this is why young children, such as Beth, who refuse to speak (particularly when they come from pathologized communities) tend to provoke a "rage for explanation" (MacLure, Holmes, Jones, & MacRae, 2010, p. 494) from adults. Children who will not speak or write, especially when there is seemingly no good reason to refuse, render themselves not completely knowable and transparent before the adult evaluative gaze.

"Trying to get out from underneath the ways…[we are] always depicted" (Tuck & Ree, 2013/2016, p. 648) can take different forms. Ahmed (2017) described feminist snap as the point at which one refuses to reproduce what one has inherited. Critiquing rhetorics of resilience as "a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance" (p. 189), Ahmed described affective processes through which bodies are asked to accept and accommodate increasing amounts of pressure. We see an affective snap in Lee's story: Teach, inspire, and instruct. The pupils must be engaged. The swastika remains. There is a departmental process to follow. After taking account of the possibility for their practices in the English classroom, as it was bounded and overwritten, Lee left the teaching profession at the end of their first year.

Snapping is a rejection of resilience, a refusal to take more pressure. To reclaim feminist snap as an affirmative action, Ahmed (2017) argued, we "might insist on renaming actions as reactions; we need to show how her snap is not the starting point" (p. 189). A snap can be refusal to remain complicit in a certain kind of system; a snap can be the start of something new. It can be capacious. Resigning can be a way of speaking out or conducting a feminist hearing (Ahmed, 2016). Lee is now enrolled in a PhD program where they believe they might have the ability to enact social change and where they have time to reflect. Having the resources and time to be away from school allowed Lee to think deeply about teaching in ways that were not possible before. Lee is in a space of privilege, as some teachers might not be in the economic position to quit. Yet, leaving teaching, rather than being an ending or a failure for Lee, points to the speculative potential of saying no to what is not working, as an opening to something new.[1] Of course, the affective potential of Lee's resistance is double-edged: It cuts one way to release them from literate practices that overwrite their own texts and discourses, and cuts another way to separate Lee's students from the texts and readings that Lee conjures when teaching. Lee's own antisocial response (removing themselves) was an act of justice and power. However, in failing to address racist and homogenizing literacy practices, the school and, more to the point, Lee's students lost an excellent teacher.

The willful child, the recalcitrant student, the vulnerable and affected teacher trainee—one who resists—is often seen as a problem (Ahmed, 2017) that requires action, a solution, at least a compromise. Saying no in a way that evades solution or judgment involves complex negotiation and maneuver. This is what we intend to approach and honor when we write about literacies of no and their capaciousness. Simpson (2016) discussed how people want an easy answer, one that makes a situation explainable and those participating in it capable of being sorted, ordered, and ranked. Rather than the literacies of no signaling a shutting down, we understand no as bursting with affective potential, while recognizing that affect not only builds capacity but also might limit a body's capacity to act: Those who refuse can experience pressure, inconvenience, and precarity. At the same time, no can provide an affective space for a different kind of identification. For example, McClean (2019) wrote about processes of silencing that constructs the no:

As an insider to a cultural and racial identity group whose identities, historically, have been silenced and/or operates in the margins, I understood the power of embodiment of identity through the telling one's story. As Ngũgĩ (1993) noted, the voices of the silenced and marginalised have the power to shift the dominant narrative. (p. 102)

We take from Abida's story the importance of saying no to literacy practices that do not recognize intersectional concerns affecting students and that uphold normative time-spaces. At the same time, we acknowledge how the same intersectional concerns that might have inhibited Abida's writing also may have enabled her to practice literacy in different ways: through refusing but also through home literacy practices. Abida reported that she did not feel comfortable writing the sensitive poem that she had chosen to write at school. Although it was not homework, she chose to write it at home predawn, when she ate and drank for the day during Ramadan. She wrote it with her older sister beside her. Refusal is a quality that is not prized in schools, yet home literacy practices can tell counterstories (Pahl, 2012, 2014). These practices lie outside the rational world of the good child writing the acceptable story for the teacher, coupled with all the underpinning assumptions about proper and innocent childhood (Dyson, 2015; Nxumalo & Ross, 2019). We do not focus on the fact that Abida eventually wrote her poem to tell a story of success in turning a no into a yes but to demonstrate the capaciousness of what no might enact through its refusal. The following is an excerpt from Abida's poem:

> Everyday we are treading on eggshells
> Being outrageous raises alarm bells
> Simply wearing hijab is suspicious
> Can't we express ourselves,
> and can you stop being so vicious?

Not Conclusion

We argued in this article that literacy has historically functioned as a humanist and humanizing project that produces a particular kind of literate subject through inclusionary and exclusionary logics. Thinking along with critical literacy scholars who have troubled this politics of rehabilitation and inclusion, and more recently drawn on affect theory to attend to the more than human, we offered four vignettes of no as affective cracks in literacy's humanism. The vignettes are both mundane and poignant for us as researchers. Thinking with them through writing this article highlighted for us how, in a globalized world of literacy, saying no is both a geopolitical gesture and a very personal one for the research participants and researchers. We propose that thinking with what we term *literacies of no* might offer a way into exploring facets of the experience of refusal, nested within an understanding of literacy practices as being ideological

and situated, but also felt, affectively, as power flows in and out of the mix. As demonstrated by the variety of our research settings and participants, no surfaces for many reasons and has a capacious potential when regarded not as something to be overcome but as a force calling our attention to injustices built into the fabric of literacy under humanism.

Socially engaged literacy scholarship runs the risk, as we highlighted earlier, of serving to find a space or location for participants within existing or slightly expanded or modified literacy frameworks. One way in which education perpetuates this colonial infrastructure is through the notion that knowledge is property to be tamed and commanded for the benefit of the learner and society at large (Patel, 2014). Increasingly, educational and literacy researchers are recognizing the problem with research that seeks to offer solutions and quick fixes. We are aware that the vignettes presented in the first parts of this article could be read as problematics to be overcome: how to change teaching practice or the conditions and contexts of learning to ensure that teachers stay in the profession, children participate as required at singing time, or young people are offered the appropriate time and conditions for creative writing. The usual narrative of research is that if practical solutions to these challenges can be identified, situations can be fixed, not only in this instance but also through replicable and generalizable models, on a wider scale. In this case, the dehabilitating tendencies of mastery (Singh, 2018) serve to debilitate no itself, rendering it no longer necessary or appropriate. When educational subjects submit willingly to the will of others, they can find ease (Ahmed, 2017).

Our final gesture of no in this article is refusing to propose such answers. We ask readers to dwell in this frictional, unsettled state and recognize how affects are not neutral and not convivial; affects are bound up in power, gliding past some bodies, building others up, and landing firmly on still others with the full weight of intergenerational inequality. As a theoretical and methodological way of thinking/feeling with literacy, affect refuses to be captured and proposes "*problems* rather than seek[ing] *solutions*" (Springgay & Truman, 2018b, p. 208). As our not conclusion, we are asking readers to consider unthinking mastery (Singh, 2018) and dwell instead in the affective capaciousness that these literacies of no have generated. For Massumi (2015), affect occupies a differential space between the actual and the virtual. Such a link, according to Truman (2019b), is speculative in that it "proposes, propels, and potentializes what could be" (p. 33). The various noes that we articulated in this article and the current proposition to sit in the affective space of not knowing and not mastering enact "an affirmative investment in another possibility" (Weiss, 2016, pp. 351–352). We know there is privilege in being able to not know, to proposing problems instead of solutions. However, it would be

irresponsible at this point to attempt a simple solution to the problems that affect studies bring to the critical modernism and humanism of the Euro-Western project of literacy. We are not alone in our misgivings. Others have written against the white savior narrative, against narratives of rehabilitation, inclusion, and mastery (Luciano & Chen, 2015; Puar, 2017; Singh, 2018; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Our argument in this article is that we need a kinder, more capacious way of describing students (and teachers) who refuse, a better recognition of the work involved in refusing, and of honoring practices of refusal and the affective atmosphere generated by them (Gadsden & Harris, 2009). We would like to enter the space of no, the space of the student who falls silent, who says no to participating, as well as the teacher who leaves. These students have too long been consigned to the bin of academic writing to privilege the good girls who, unlike Abida, produce poetry on time. We are interested in the field of no as a porthole to an alternative universe, a TARDIS (a nod to *Doctor Who*) that rocks with the intelligence of another kind of resistance. This is the beginning of many more noes. We are aware of the grand narratives of literacy fixing as a discourse of subjection (see, e.g., Northrop, 2017), and we propose thinking alongside refusal and moments of no as a way of reaching toward a way forward, a way out, and a space for something else to take shape. We offer this article as a failure (Halberstam, 2011) that refuses rational knowledge, literacy as a panacea, saying yes, and being good. Yet, we hope that within the cracks of this article lies another vision, one that engages with no as a moment that can lead us through a crack into another universe that contains new answers and new questions.

NOTES

[1]Affect builds capacity but also can decapacitate a body's ability to act in the future. In this regard, no, as well as being a political gesture, can signal privilege and desperation. There is a risk in saying no in many instances, but in others, it might be accompanied by the privilege of being socially positioned in a way that allows someone to refuse. Similarly, although we focus on individual actors in these vignettes, we want to highlight that neither no nor affect is tethered to an individual.

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