

## **Co-constructing Place, Space, and Race: African American and Latinx Participants and Researchers' Representations of Digital Literacy Research in the South**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we examine the processes, struggles, and interactions that shape the co-construction of digital literacy programs and research for African American and Latinx parents and children in the South. The guiding questions of this piece are: (1) What do African American and Latinx<sup>1</sup> participants' counter-stories tell us about place-space and raced literacies? and (2) How do we, as digital literacy researchers, negotiate and co-construct counter narratives in institutional spaces? We draw on analytic reflexivity tools (Anderson, 2006) to describe how our positionalities as researchers/practitioners of color collaborate with multiple stake-holders in the design and implementation of community and school-based digital media projects for African American and Latinx parents and students. Within these contested spaces are distinct binaries of social, political, historical, and cultural literacies that resound in our digital literacy research in communities where we (the researcher-practitioners) are often positioned as cultural insiders.

**Keywords:** *place and space literacies, African Americans, Latino/a Americans, digital literacies, race, culture, New Literacy Studies, multimodalities*

## **Introduction**

In this space we call digital literacies lies multiple texts, meaning-making, and social practices that lend themselves to the ways children and adults learn in today's societies. Young children, adolescents, and adults engage in practices and technologies such as digital storytelling (Hall & Damico, 2007; Hull & Katz, 2006; Lewis Ellison, 2016, 2017; Lewis Ellison, & Wang, under review; Noguérón-Liu, & Jordan, in press); Solomon, 2012; Vasudevan, 2006), remixing (Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008), multiplayer online games (Gee, 2008; Lewis Ellison, Evans, with Pike, 2016), videos, texting (Drouin, 2011; Drouin & Davis, 2009; Lewis, 2013; Reardon, 2008), blogs (Beach, Anson, Breuch, & Swiss, 2009; Lewis, 2014), and social networking sites (Watkins, 2009) to keep up with today's ways of learning, creating, talking, constructing meaning, and experiencing life. These individuals develop (digital) participatory cultures (Dooley, Lewis Ellison, & Welch, 2016; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushtoma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009) to engage with other readers, writers, thinkers, and storytellers to form alliances and networks (Lewis Ellison, 2014; Lewis Ellison, & Wang, 2016; Lewis Ellison, Evans, with Pike, 2016) that shed light on who they want to be in these spaces, how they choose to interact with peers, and where they want their contributions to matter (Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009). In these spaces, they are Do-it-yourself (DIY) learners who are initiators; they take control over their learning and utilize opportunities in meaningful ways (Parker, 2010). Yet, these spaces and places are shaped by issues of race, power, social class, and gender, and that reflect the unique dimensions of the ways in which digital literacy research is studied, conceived, and perceived in the South.

We live in a climate where cries of race-specific injustices, inequities, oppression, and past and present crimes prevail among children, adolescents, and adults of African American and

Latinx descent. We wrestle with the heavy-laden discourses, political measures, reforms, and interpretations that attempt to bind the ways in which members of these groups learn, understand, and live in this digitally-mediated society. While conducting research in African American and Latinx communities, we notice that young children, adolescents, and adults have rich digital literacy practices, and are knowledgeable participators within the digital cultures that they create; nevertheless, they face vocal and visible markers in how race, space, and place are situated in their everyday lives in the South (Lewis, 2011, 2014). As authors, we understand that race is a vital component to sociohistorical and sociocultural lenses that cannot be separated from “the bound compartments of time to which it is forever tied” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 117). The historical accounts in the South relating to racism, stereotypes, and oppression have left an indelible mark on how we, as researchers, tell our participants’ stories, and on who we are as digital literacy researchers.

Our work has drawn us to places where stories dwell and where conceptions about participants’ lives and practices are organic but meaningful. As qualitative researchers who share cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds with the communities we study, we are simultaneously positioned as both “outsiders” and “insiders”. We are afforded the opportunity to tell these visceral stories that derive from the racist, and oppressive realities of some individuals. And, when we think about spaces and places, we honor and reflect on the community and program spaces we co-construct with our participants, wherein we have been privileged to listen to their sensitive stories, in efforts to discuss, problematize and re-imagine the marginalized positions through our collaborative research. Thus, place, space, and race are paramount in our research areas because of the ways in which our work is influenced by broader issues of movement of youth and adults in literacy and digital media spaces within Georgia and Texas. Our discussion

of modern life in the deep south and rural regions help us understand how access and place are played out in digital literacies. We identified in our individual and collective journeys that this work has not been discussed in the ways we have experienced it personally and academically.

In this article, we share accounts from northern and southern cities in the state of Georgia (Atlanta and a small city in the north of the state) and Austin, Texas, and discuss our understanding of the roles of place, space, and race in our work in these respective locations. The heart of Atlanta, Georgia, displays beacons of history, community, diversity, and education. Each year, approximately forty-two hundred African American individuals migrate from Cobb, Fulton, DeKalb, and Gwinnett counties to Atlanta, (Hess, Henrici & Williams, 2011; Hobson, 2009). Furthermore, recent transnational migration patterns have shaped the meaning of diversity and race relations, with both urban and rural areas of Georgia experiencing a rapid demographic shift (Lippard & Gallagher, 2011).

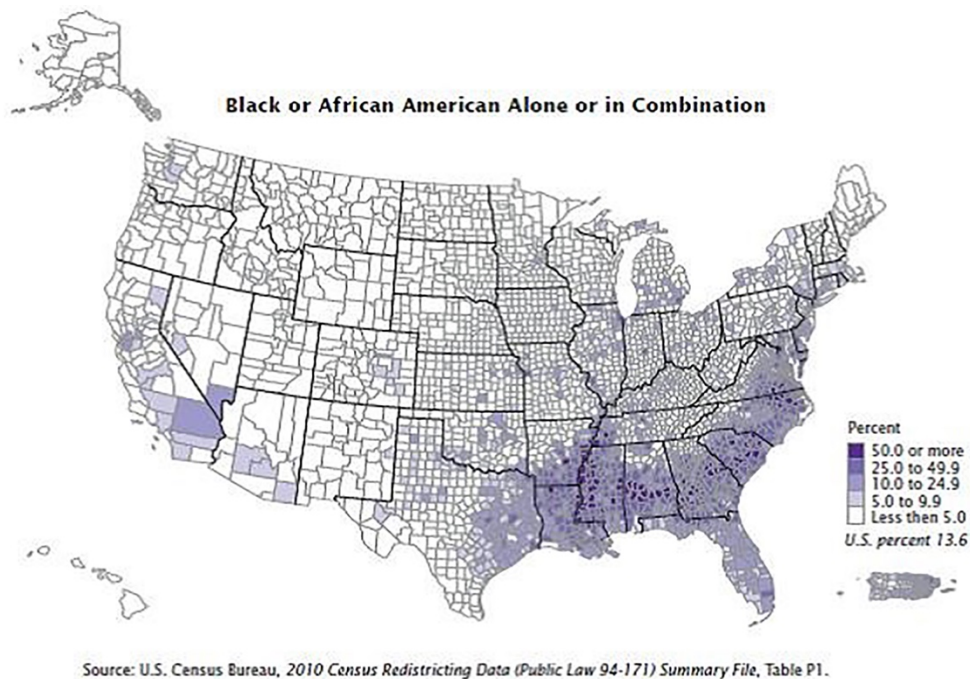


Figure 1. Black or African American Population as a Percent of County Population (2010)

Georgia's population of Latinx residents has also increased greatly over the past 20 years. This growth is due to increased job opportunities in textile, food processing, and construction industries, as well as an oversaturation of job markets in traditional destination settings (Lippard & Gallagher, 2011). Between 1990 and 2000 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005) and from 2010 to 2011 (Passell, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011), seven states in the Southern region saw some of the highest percentages of changes in Latinx population growth: North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, and Kentucky. These shifting demographics disrupt and change the dynamics of Black/White relations, as is evident in challenges faced by activist organizations trying to involve new immigrants in their social-justice oriented groups (Smith, 2006). The state of Georgia, where two of the projects featured in this paper were conducted, was one of the ten top states with a fastest growing Latinx population from 2000-2011 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013), with a 103% rate of growth. The rapid Latinization of the region points to the need to document how Latinx residents in new migration destinations make sense of their positions, identities, and connections to their homeland and new communities.

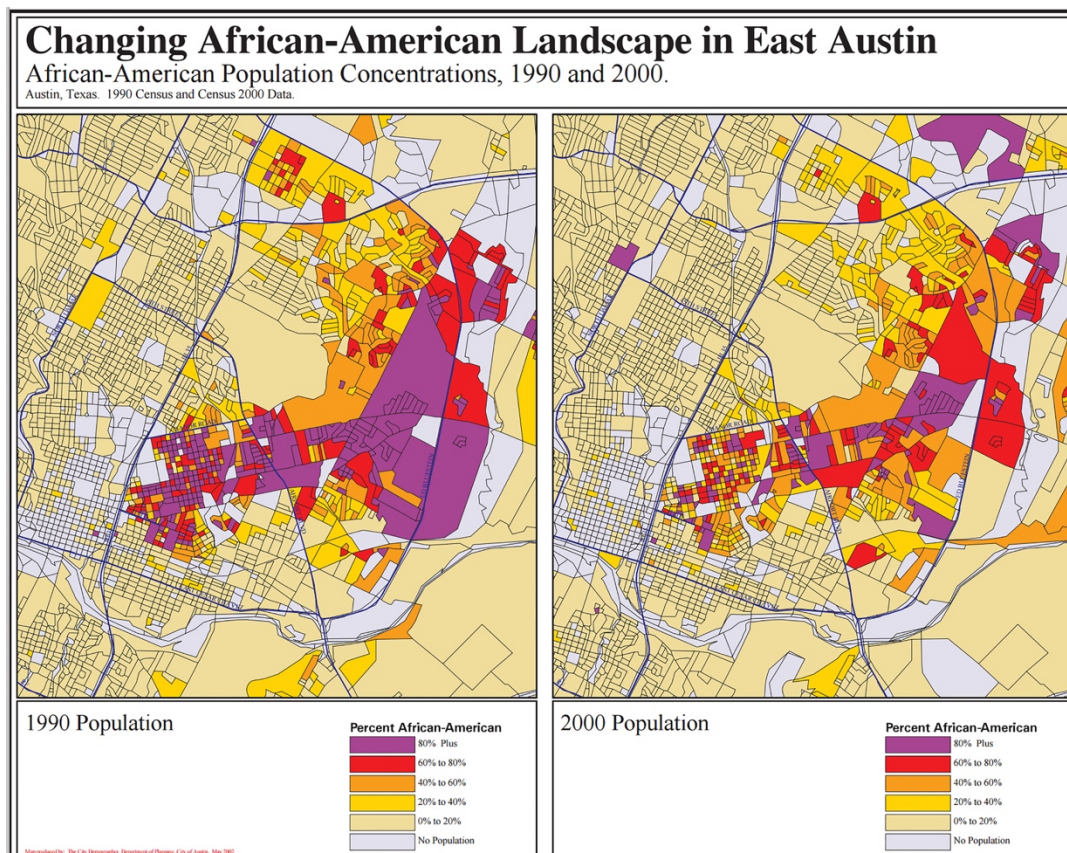


Figure 2. Changing African American Landscape in East Austin (1990-2000)

Similarly, Austin (Austin, Texas), is a growing city in population and national prominence, particularly in the areas of everything cutting edge: music, movies, technology, and education. At the same time, it is a city that struggles to keep its liberal, free-spirited roots as its gentrification increases (Bertrand, 2015), and as less-affluent and marginalized populations are forced to the city's perimeter.

In this article, we frame our concern and attention with the prevalent identity, race, and equity issues that are often hidden and disguised in these various regions to influence where, how, and why we conduct digital literacy research in the South. By focusing on our participatory and action research methods, the complexities of our positionality, and our personal and reflective vignettes, we explore how we negotiate our lives and selves as African American and

Latinx researchers. We argue that a counter-storytelling (Bell, 1980; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Urrieta, & Villenas, 2013) lens from African American/Latinxs' perspectives can shed new light into our understanding of the affordances of digital literacies in the construction and power of space and place. While we acknowledge that these same issues may also be dominant in other areas and ethnicities in the United States, for the purposes of this article, we focus on the roles of place, space, and race in three digital literacy projects concerning African American and Latinx parents and children that were conducted in the hearts of Georgia and Texas. We then share our constructive sentiments as digital literacy researchers of color who conduct research along with our participants in these southern states. The following research questions guide our inquiry:

1. What do African American and Latinx participants' counter-stories tell us about place-space and raced literacies? and
2. How do we, as digital literacy researchers, negotiate, and co-construct counter-stories in institutional spaces?

## **Theoretical Framing**

### **Place-Space Literacies**

Human learning is heavily influenced by social environments (Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, we understand that individuals' environments are important to the learning places and spaces in which we participate; however, we also need to address *whose* places and spaces are represented. Miller (2014) reminds us that "spaces/places as spatialized are not fixed or static: they shape and orient people's values, thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and identities, while people also shape spaces/places and ascribe meaning to them" (p. 124). Hence, we adopt a perspective where we aim to better understand participants' practices, beliefs and emic understandings of the communities and neighborhoods where they live, play, create, and learn.



As such, space is a “practiced place” (de Certeau, 1984), but *place* and *space* are quite different. According to de Certeau, “the street geometrically defined by urban planning is [a place] transformed into space by walkers” (p. 117), or rather, the “act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs” (p. 117). Place is “an order of distributed relationships, location, and fixity, such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired,” while space is “emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable” (Talbut, 2000, p. 19). Additionally, “places exist in and of themselves, but spaces are places brought to life” (Blackburn & Clark, 2014, p. 94). By adopting a space-as-practiced-place approach, we seek to illuminate the agency of communities of color in the reshaping and transformation of social spaces.

Our work in place-spaced literacies in digital literacy research builds on previous research extended in the South through participation and collaboration with literacy scholars across digital spaces. The **Southern Places – Digital Spaces Collaborative** (<https://soplacesdigspaces.wordpress.com/>), founded by scholars, from southeast areas, is an example of previous work across southern regions and rural areas in the U.S. to understand the social and digital spaces that form their work as a communicative practice (Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010; Mills & Comber, 2013). While they found that these social, digital, and geographical spaces are represented in the literature around urban spaces (Soja, 2010; Vasudean, 2006), they point to the critical need for recognizing this work in the South in order to expand the conversation beyond urban areas. Thus, there is a great need to represent the digital based projects that comprise our work.

### **Counter-Storytelling and Digital Resources**

In our research, we illustrate how community-based and school-based programs become spaces for youth and adults to re-imagine and revise deficit perspectives about their identities as well as the places/spaces where they live and learn. We pay special attention to the affordances of digital tools for individuals who are regarded as “at-risk” based on their affiliations with neighborhoods or cities, or their nation-state origins (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009). Drawing on foundational tenets of Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), we explore how community-based programs, relationships, and the digitally-mediated sharing of lived experiences can help participants craft counter-stories and challenge deficit ideologies about people of color. Like Vasudevan (2006), we consider digital and multimodal resources as having great potential for students and research participants to tell and construct different stories in different ways.

We also explored how participatory methods allow us to build coalitions and reach out to minority youth and families in the South (Harman & Vargas-Dubai, 2012), creating opportunities for storytelling and composition where counter-stories emerge. In the different programs described in this article, our projects share a participatory paradigm aligned with the functions of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), which include: (a) building community among traditionally/historically marginalized communities; (b) creating contexts to transform established ideologies; (c) creating possibilities for individuals to recognize others facing similar challenges; and (d) collaborating with others in the combination of stories and individuals’ current realities and issues. As a method and pedagogical tool, counter-storytelling with digital tools allows us to explore in depth the connections between identity, marginalization, and affiliation in relation to place.

We examine these processes in the texts and stories shared by participants in digital composition projects we lead. However, as designers and facilitators of workshops, programs, and projects, we find ourselves invested in advocacy for communities where we belong. By writing and presenting research findings that challenge deficit perspectives about technology expertise, our scholarship positions us as brokers between institutions and our communities (Villenas, 1996). Hence, we theorize our collective reflection as counter-stories as well, voicing the challenges, obstacles, and processes of conducting participatory research with individuals who share cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds with us.

### **Beyond the Digital Divide: Digital Literacy as Culturally and Socially Constructed**

We explore digital literacies through the lens of New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995) and multimodalities (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), highlighting the great potential of critical and participatory methods in the examination of classroom practices that may benefit families and ethnic minority youth in the South (Morrell, 2005). However, we argue that common assumptions in technology-based interventions may require further interrogation and self-reflection of our roles as researchers and practitioners, and of our cultural, linguistic, gender, and racial identities. These include: (a) deficit perspectives about digital access and participation of culturally diverse communities without critical analysis of digital divide ideologies (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010); (b) assumptions about generational digital expertise vis-à-vis adults who are not digital ‘natives’; (e.g., Prensky, 2001); and (c) assumptions about the neutrality of tools, interfaces, and applications which may have been designed in terms of class, race, gender, language competence, or educational background with a particular user in mind (Warschauer, 2003). Through our established relationships with participants in the field, our use of

ethnographic methods, and our attention to participants' emic perspectives on their use of technology, we seek to illuminate the culturally situated nature of digital literacies in relation to place/space.

Drawing from our theoretical orientations to literacy and digital literacy as culturally and socially situated entities (Street, 1995), we share the ways in which we designed and implemented our studies, and our tensions and struggles as researchers, teachers, "tech-savvy" instructors, and "cultural insiders" with strong commitments to advocacy for students with whom we shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, we illustrate how we balanced these roles with our roles as outsiders to their life circumstances, and how we addressed the power-relation differential in the research process, one that was influenced by our affiliations with schools/universities (Villenas, 1996). We situate the goals of our work in unpacking digital divide assumptions, and our stances on the ethical use of visual methods (through digital and visual media created by us, our students, or a collaboration thereof) as visual meanings, understandings, and interpretations that may operate differently in particular groups and communities (Pink, 2007). We draw on analytic reflexivity tools (Anderson, 2006) to describe how our positionalities as researchers/practitioners of color collaborate with multiple stakeholders in the design and implementation of community and school-based digital media projects for African American and Latinx parents and students.

### **Methodology: Reflexivity as Researchers**

Based on our shared interests in digital literacies, multimodalities, race, and cultured spaces among African American and Latinx American families, young children, and adolescents, we began our collaboration six years ago. We initially met as participants in a national mentoring program for scholars of color, and later presented at a literacy conference focusing on digital

literacy research. While our work captures the essence of digital literacy practices in our respective states, we also share our own culturally and linguistically diverse subjectivities in relation to digital media and digital literacy practices, as well as the ways in which we situate our work both in and out of the field. On one occasion, we examined the overlapping challenges of our work in a symposium centered on research methods, where we compared data instances of fieldwork, race, and space. We highlighted the epistemologies that informed our research and equally questioned what we called our *methodological epistemologies* or the ethos of approaches and practices that researchers (self) identify to acquire knowledge in research. We noticed that, as residents of Georgia and Texas, we have experienced in different ways the impact of place, space, and race on our work. We interviewed and audio-recorded ourselves to capture organic stories of our subjectivities and positionalities, have met on many occasions via conference calls, Skype, and at conferences to discuss the roles of space, place, and race in our work. We ultimately created Google documents to share our thoughts, store our work, and eventually collaborate for this article.

Tisha, an African American, brings several years of experience in exploring how the intersections of agency, identity, and power are situated among African American families and adolescents' digital literacy and multimodal practices. *Silvia* is a bilingual, first-generation immigrant, whose research focuses on the access of new technologies for Latinx immigrant communities in the United States. Marva is an African American with more than 18 years of experience teaching English Language Learners, and hones her skills in examining the use of digital tools for identity-building among African American first graders. All researchers are assistant professors at major universities.

### **Co-constructing Contexts**

Our data illustrates three separate qualitative and exploratory research studies that shape our co-constructions of place, space, and race literacies in digital media programs in urban and rural areas of Georgia and Texas. The data excerpts featured in this article were identified as instances of “tensions” where our own understandings of space and digital literacy practices were challenged or reshaped by our engagement in fieldwork with participants. Study 1 examined data from a larger qualitative research study project, *Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project*<sup>2</sup> of five African American mothers and their children’s digital storytelling practices in an urban community college lab and church in Georgia. In this article, one mother, Chant’s counter-stories grew from her and her son’s, Rem, involvement in creating a digital story together. They participated in two digital storytelling workshops with Tisha for a total of three hours in a computer lab, and brainstormed and engaged in story boarding activities in preparation for their stories. Chant and Rem also completed a video of their discussions and how they negotiated multimodal modes for the digital story in their home. Data sources included: pre- and post- semi-structured and un-structured interviews, audio- and video-taped participant observations, field notes, digital photos, digital workshops, and the completed digital story created between April and September 2014 (Lewis Ellison, 2016; 2017; Lewis Ellison & Wang, under review). In this article, Tisha shared Chant’s narratives that extended from creating the digital story but also how digital media access and internet inaccessibilities and inequalities collide within her urban spaces.

Study 2 examines the ways in which, with the aid of digital tools, Latinx immigrant adults who participated in the *Family Literacy - Clase de Computación Project*<sup>3</sup> made sense of the location of their current neighborhood (a small mobile home community in Georgia), and of their places of origin in southern Mexico. Such interactions occurred in two related family

literacy programs implemented during the academic years of 2012-2014 at an elementary school and a community-based library. Nine focal participants were individually interviewed. A total of 49 sessions were implemented in Year 1, and 22 sessions in Year 2. All were conducted by Silvia and a graduate assistant. Sessions were facilitated in Spanish and audio recorded, with reflective field notes and logs of digital documents kept by the researchers. For the purpose of this paper, Silvia focuses on interactions between Latinx parents at the elementary school site, where they searched for images and maps of their current neighborhoods, and used images to represent and explore their places of origin.

Study 3 was an exploratory project investigating the role digital tools could play in the writing processes of 12 African American first graders. The *Make Me a Story Project* took place over a spring semester during a center-time pull-out program in the school's computer lab. The first graders met two-to-three times a week for approximately 30 minutes, at which time they planned and completely composed their stories using digital storytelling software that differentiated their process from traditional writing. There were also sessions where they met to share their creations on a large screen for a computer author's chair (Labbo, 2004) experience. Marva acted as tech support and facilitator when the students asked for help with the technology. Data collected included audio and video recordings of writing and sharing sessions, transcripts of their digital stories, samples of pre-study first grade writing assignments, and interview surveys from parents and teachers. The children were also interviewed before, during, and after the project took place. While the study focused on their interactions with digital tools and how those tools might influence their texts, the present paper explores the unexpected issues that emerged during the implementation of the study.

## **Findings**

In the following sections, we demonstrate how place, space, and race are co-constructed among African American and Latinx parents, youth, and adults in the South, and we explore the tensions that arose as we conducted digital literacy research.

## Study 1

### Tisha – “We Don’t Do That in Your Community”

*Participants’ Counter-stories.* Before researching digital literacy practices among African American families in the South, Tisha studied a family living in an urban community in the Northeast section of the United States. Digital literacy practices and narratives revealed how an African American mother and her 10-year-old son composed stories about living in an urban neighborhood. However, what could have been a story that spelled despair became one of empowerment; what was most intriguing was that the mother’s intricate psycho-social identity afforded unique digital literacy practices between her and her son—ones that told a different story about survival, agency, and power (Lewis, 2011, 2013, 2014). Findings from this study led Tisha to create the *Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project* to teach families how to create digital stories from personal interest stories in their home/school communities (Lewis Ellison, 2016; Lewis Ellison & Wang, under review). This project invited African American mothers whose agentive stances galvanized them to learn to create digital stories with their family members. For this article, however, Tisha focused solely on Chant and Rem and Chant’s narratives about access and inequalities with the digital.

Place played a major role in the work with Chant. Chant, a 36-year-old college professor and single parent, and her 9-year-old son Rem were participants in the *Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project* in 2014. As avid digital literacy users and creators, Chant and Rem met with Tisha at an urban community, college computer lab to create a digital story together.



Their digital story, “Our Travels”, highlighted their car travels from the southeastern to mid-western areas of the United States. Their pictures and stories told of their navigation through a variety of states—from serene areas to ones where Confederate flags were openly displayed. Chant and Rem demonstrated how a mother and son could not only work together to digitally compose a story from inception to completion, but how digital tools in the home became a viable literacy practice.

While Chant’s income classified her as middle-class, she admitted that she and Rem have always lived in urban neighborhoods since her move to Georgia in 2010, and she currently lives in a neighborhood where most of her neighbors are of African American descent. At times, she is stereotyped by this choice to remain in her community. She stated, “I’m not afraid to be near my people.” And yet, while she pledged solidarity to her community, she was victim of car and home burglary, and occasionally witnessed inconsistencies with the upkeep of portions of the neighborhood. A major disturbance arose when she attempted to provide more efficient technological access for herself and Rem, a disturbance that demonstrated both race- and place-based oppression.

My Internet is fairly fast. However, I do live in a part of town where sometimes issues do arise—maybe the dynamics of the community lends itself to sometimes not getting equal access to certain resources. Sometimes the Internet may not work effectively as it would if I lived in Buckhead or Brookhaven. I was looking at switching my Internet provider and service from Comcast to Direct TV for financial reasons. It would have been more financially feasible and beneficial if I made some changes, so I called Direct TV and said, ‘I have Direct TV and I also have a Comcast phone, Internet, and television; however, I

[want to] bundle it together.’ They informed me, ‘No we don’t do that in your community.’

Chant shared that she was upset about being forced to keep her current Internet service because of her neighborhood. She also shared more of her phone conversation with the Internet customer representative:

‘That’s very interesting,’ I said, ‘You don’t do that in *my* community?’ And she [the customer representative] said, ‘What’s your zip code?’ I told her and she said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘What about zip code 30309?’ (a zip code from another county) She said, ‘Oh yes we do this service there.’ So, it is safe to say that certain technologies are not available in my community. I could get AT&T Internet, but those two systems can’t merge with Comcast for some reason just because of my zip code, where it would be cheaper and much more beneficial if I were to have access to those services. We don’t have access so we have to pay the premium rates for Internet access that sometimes fails.

However, Chant recently shared that there are currently new changes in her community since our interview last year:

I’m noticing the shift in ethnic/racial dynamics of the community, so I’m quite sure within the next year that service will be available as more people of the majority, *White*, move into my community. That service will become available because they will scream and shout loud enough and their voices will be heard although the people currently in the community scream and shout but we are silenced because our voices don’t count as loudly as theirs.

Chant's raw narratives describe accounts of racism, oppression, inequalities, and digital inaccessibilities in urban communities that have made *place* a disrupted space where those outside the place determine "who gets what," "why and how," and "for how long."

***Researcher's Counter-stories.*** As digital literacy researchers of color, we occupy and negotiate our lives and selves in the research we conduct. As part of our roles as scholars, we constantly negotiate, re-negotiate, and co-construct ourselves to present the work about which we are passionate. Oftentimes, we are confronted by perceptions of the Other that need clarifying (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). For instance, Tisha experienced many conflicting counter examples when she presented the complex and taken-for-granted digital literacy practices of a female participant she studied, at various literacy conferences. Tisha carefully watched the gestural and spatial movements of conference attendees when sharing how this research was conducted in the participant's *bedroom*, as this was the site where the family's digital literacy tools were located and where practices occurred. Other raised glances and comments exploded after Tisha disclosed how the participant and her then nine-year-old son would often text and instant message each other less than two feet away from one another. Many conference attendees, showed frowns, confused looks, and the shaking of heads to describe their lack of understanding why the mother participant would want to text and IM than talk with her son. In addition, when Tisha shared that the participant was from a low-income population, a presentation attendee handed her a huge book containing several literacy practices Tisha should use with the participant to "boost" her literacy skills. Also, after discussing the digital literacy practices of how a middle-class mother and son composed a digital story together, one individual mused that "it would have been interesting to know how this study would have been done (panned out) from a family from low-income."

These examples demonstrate issues of social class, status, and contextual power that are at times hidden in research spaces, but that nevertheless open up heuristics for us to understand these spaces. When individuals in power heard Tisha's research focus, the following response was given: "You need to get out [of the homes]. You need to go into the schools [to conduct research]!" Such feedback suggested that Tisha's research scholarship was viewed as irrelevant, incomprehensible, or undervalued. The fact that Tisha's research is burgeoning across the northern United States appeared to demonstrate that perhaps it was not deemed purposeful in the South. However, Tisha contend that studying families' digital literacy practices—or any practice—in any home constitutes rich spaces that Talburt (2000) calls "emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable" (p. 19).

## **Study 2**

### **Silvia – "We are Not Even on the Map"**

*Participants' Counter-stories.* In Silvia's work with immigrant families in a small town in Georgia, Silvia became aware of the reconfiguration of place and community in the lives of families who were encountering digital literacies for the first time. Mediated by geo-location services in smartphones and Google applications, Silvia and the parent participants in the Family Literacy Program were able to zoom into their current city, the mobile home neighborhood where many of them lived, and the small towns of southeast Mexico that many have not visited in more than 10 years. In the planning of a field trip to the local library, Silvia guided them in the search of directions from the mobile home community to the central areas of the city. However, they could not find their address—Google Maps<sup>®</sup> would not zoom into their mobile home lots. "*Ni en el mapa salimos / We are not even on the map*" argues one of the mothers, Olga, whose declaration made the erasure of their presence—both online and in the city—visible. Similar

comments were made by Diana and Mireya, who are also residents in the same community; however, their comments were about their *ranchitos* of origin: they are close to small cities, but they also fail to show up on a Google map. But, as Mireya explains, many of the residents of her hometown *ranchos* are now living in Magnolia—more of them are “here” than “there.”

As part of the New Latino Diaspora community (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002), residents of immigrant origin like Olga face the challenges and opportunities of entering a sociopolitical space where the positioning of Latinos by mainstream residents breaks molds of traditional black/white race relations, and intersects with existing issues of class difference and spatial segregation. In the focal county where Silvia conducted this study, Latinx residents came from various nation-states (Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico), but were lumped together under the pan-ethnic identity marker as “Hispanics” or “Latinos.” Yet, connections to specific nation-states and to the particular localities of origin allowed participants in this project to co-construct a shared allegiance, and use these affiliations to co-construct powerful counter narratives about their funds of knowledge. Diana, Mireya, and Rosalinda searched for photos of their cities and *ranchos* of origin in a project aimed to design digital slide shows for their children. Prompted by the sharing of these images with their peers in the sessions, pictures of gazebos, churches, and majestic landscapes predominated in their finished products, as well as explanations of traditional local practices. The effort to share these images with their children, and for the children to understand their parents’ heritage, drove parents and mothers in this program to visually document their transnational affiliations.

While issues of race relations were not overtly discussed in the sessions of this program, it is relevant to point out that participants in the study came from different nation-states; most of them were of Mexican-origin, but some were from urban areas in Guatemala and Honduras.

Nation-state affiliation was constructed within this parent group as a relevant identity marker; we compared and contrasted variations in dialect, relevant traditions, content in their home countries' curricula, and religious traditions. As mentioned by Smith (2006), Latinos in the South face complicated and unique circumstances in affiliation and coalition forming: discrimination conditions vary among immigrants based on undocumented statuses, language differences, and non-unifying constructions of race in the Latinx community. Yet, specific place-based affiliations—from localities as small as *ranchitos*, to the various nation-states represented in the class—were predominant in interactions and self-ascribed identification within the parent group.

As a researcher who shares a cultural and linguistic background with the group, but who grew up in a city in a different region, Silvia realized that she was an outsider to the erasure and limited visibility of their local and transnational places of residence, which was reified by our online searches in Google maps. Silvia documented such struggles and concerns, noticing the rural-to-rural migration pattern in some of the participants' cases, where access to services and public transportation was limited both “here” and “there.” However, through the assemblage of digital images featuring landmarks, events, and local practices, participants found the resources to reconstruct their homelands in ways that online maps failed to do (Noguerón-Liu, & Jordan, in press). These visual representations counter the invisibility of locations relevant to them, and reveal critical insights on the ways spaces and places can be reimagined with online resources.

***Researcher's Counter-stories.*** Silvia explored how intersections of race, space, and place in the new South reiterated the unique and parallel visibility of one community in two nation-states: a rural-to-rural migration where individuals compare their communities of origin—which, like them, have been transplanted to areas equally marginalized and peripheral to mainstream “cities” and desirable neighborhoods. However, by sitting next to Mireya, Diana, Olga, and

Rosalinda, Silvia experienced digital tours to the plazas, fields, and churches they held dearly in their minds and hearts—places that they had not seen in years, but followed and appreciated in photos shared by relatives and tourists on Facebook, Flickr, and other sources for Google Images. During program sessions, Silvia had the opportunity to support the parent participants in the editing and organizing of the photos of their gardens, chili plants, and soccer fields in the Magnolia neighborhood, the place where their children live, play, and learn.

While transnational perspectives of language and literacy research illuminate the great potential of digital technologies to maintain and reify transnational affiliations (Lam & Warriner, 2012), it is relevant to rethink the ways that immigrant communities rethink and reproduce these ties in new migration settings, where existing legacies of segregation and discrimination shape contemporary intercultural relations. By sharing and presenting participants' perspectives to school personnel and other local institutions, Silvia became aware of her own limited understanding of the home communities of families who were foreign-born, like her. Making sense of the heterogeneity of the Latinx experience is not only relevant for individuals who do not share this cultural and linguistic background; it is important for Latinx researchers to interrogate and reflect on their own positionalities, and on the potential of digital resources to build bridges of understanding within groups of Latinx descent---understanding of the unique histories, traditions, and challenges in various nation-states and regions.

### **Study 3**

#### **Marva - “Split like an old Fifties’ B-movie Town”**

*Participants’ Counter-stories.* Austin is stratified by economics and race, with most marginalized populations living east of the interstate that splits the city like the railroad in an old 1950s’ B-movie town. The further west you go, the wealthier (and whiter) the population gets;

conversely, the population becomes browner and more impoverished further east of the interstate. While a good number of middle-class Latinx families occupy the centrally located neighborhoods, only a sprinkling of black children appeared in schools west of the interstate. Census data classified Austin as a non-majority city, as the white population has dipped below 50%. However, the African Americans percentage of the population represented a shallow decline ([www.austintexas.gov](http://www.austintexas.gov)) (United States Census, 2011).

Marva's school was one such "sprinkle" school. The population draws from comfortable southwestern suburbs, rural areas south of the city limits, and a few trailer parks that line the major road just north of the campus. At the time of Marva's research, the student population was approximately 40 percent Latino/a, 37 percent white, and the rest were an even percentage of African American children and other racial categories. Thirty-six percent of the students received free and reduced lunch. As such, the school had the misfortune of occupying a middle place: its population was not wealthy enough to reap the monetary and time benefits of stay-at-home moms, and was not nearly poor enough to qualify for federal funds based on free and reduced lunch numbers. For most of Marva's tenure, she was the only black teacher at the school. There was one Latino teacher in every grade level except kindergarten because each grade required at least one bilingual teacher. The bilingual kindergarten teacher was white.

Despite the lack of teachers of color at the school, race was not an issue at Marva's school. Rather, it was not mentioned, except to comment on its lack of importance or non-existence. The teacher who taught next door to Marva often declared that she "didn't see color." After Marva started graduate school and read the research, Marva told her that such a statement was on a "list of the worst things you could possibly say" (Rains, 1998). Nevertheless, Marva could not break her habit. It was ingrained in that space as the ideal perception. At her school,



the equity traps (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) of *racial erasure* (hooks, 1992) and *employment of the gaze* (Foucault, 2002) that enforced color blindness was a badge of honor.

It was in that space that Marva conducted research on African American children's digital storytelling. That year, there were 12 first graders classified in school records as African American, and 8 of their families agreed to participate in the study. When Marva received the permission forms, she noticed that, on some of them, the parents expressed concerns that their children might feel singled out. Others noted that their children were not entirely African American, but were of mixed race. While the school administration expressed total support of Marva's research, the teachers often whispered their worries that the children would figure out that they were invited to the computer lab at 2 p.m. on Fridays because they were Black. The teachers who did not whisper conveniently forgot to send their students at the appointed time. Between parent notes and teachers' comments and actions, Marva felt the heavy weight of "The Gaze", which is often employed to "norm[alize] behavior" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 620). To abide to, what we call, everyone's *sensitive insensitivities*, also relating to white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), Marva employed some strategies to ease their minds. Marva sent home more permission slips and ended up with a larger pool of students that represented all races at the school. In this way, Marva invited other children to participate, which seemed to soothe everyone's feelings enough so that, after a while, people stopped noticing when she only called for the African American children.

For the children, this project was their first chance during the school year to create their own stories, digitally or otherwise. Examples collected of their previous class work included mostly prompt writing, and "what did you do on the weekend" journal entries that kept the students busy while their teachers collected notes and lunch money. But once they were freed

from prompts and the time-limited boundaries of Monday morning business time, the first graders produced amazing and unique stories. They told the stories they wanted to tell for their own purposes, whether it was to create a tale of knights and kings, to make friends laugh, or to simply make a friend. The fact that the storytelling was digital, amplified their excitement (Solomon, 2009). The first graders used multimodal tools to express themselves as individuals beyond their capabilities with traditional tools. Beyond literacy skills, the children also used digital storytelling to express their whole selves, including their Black selves.

Most of the students drew upon cultural resources like *call and response* and *signifying* (Smitherman, 1977) to increase the production values of their stories. Given the opportunity, one student chose to share her bi-racial story. She changed her mouse tip hue to pink for her White friends, and colored in Black faces to represent her mother and granny. In her self-portrait, she merely outlined her own face with Black, thus illustrating her multi-racial identity.

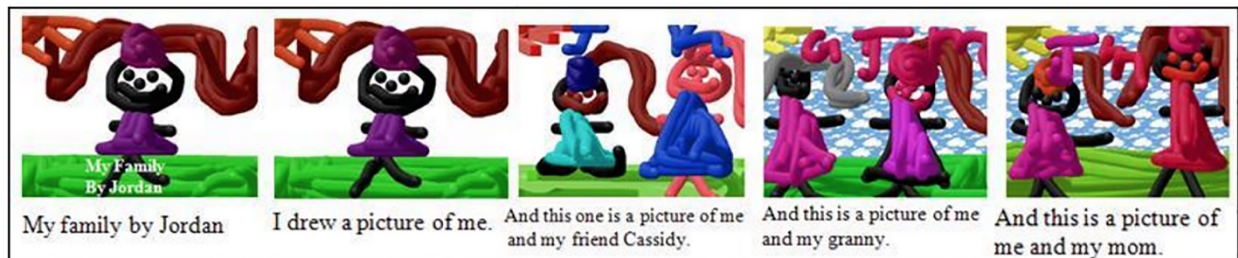


Figure 3. Digital Story Transcript from Marva's project

In the space created by the digital storytelling project, race was not as invisible as it was decreed outside the computer lab's door.

**Researcher's Counter-stories.** In mid-April 2009, near the end of Marva's digital storytelling project, one of the first grade teachers stopped her in the hall. She said, half-jokingly, "What'd you do to my kid?" She had assigned the students in her class to write to the prompt,

“Describe a perfect Easter egg.” Byron, one of the participants in the study, chose to ignore the imposed limits of the assigned prompt and instead tell a 4-page story about an alien invasion spawned from an Easter egg, complete with a magical sword, a dying king, and a Pokémon character. Marva smiled and shrugged, but said to myself, “Go to it, Little Man. Let it out. Let it all out.”

Working on the present project with Tisha and Silvia gave her the opportunity to reflect on who she was during that particular digital storytelling project, and on who she is now as a researcher. By sharing ideas with Tisha and Silvia, Marva realized how much she conformed to the structure of her space. Racial erasure was the enforced rule when Marva implemented her project, and in the military and West Texas schools that she herself attended through K-12. Enforced color blindness did not frustrate her—she had long ago developed strategies to worked around it. Marva’s strategy was to invite a larger pool of children to the computer lab to obscure the Blackness of her actual targets. Similarly, in a competition for internal grants that Marva wrote just one year ago, she molded her study design to fit a quantitative format and topic that was assured most preferred by the committee, even though it was not *her* most preferred format and topic. While reflecting on the frustrations of Tisha, with those from positions of power, it struck Marva of much she tended to accept the confines of space and place.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In this article, we aimed to illustrate the complex ways in which African American and Latinx participants and researchers engage in collaborative digital literacy projects where the relation of place, space, and racial identity intersect. We pointed to the ways in which master narratives and inequality issues emerge in our interactions with participants about technology access, visibility, and self-representation. In Tisha’s study, equitable access to digital services

was bound to the social constructions and stigma associated with a “neighborhood,” as expressed in the counter narrative shared by Chant. In Silvia’s study, the small size and scale of a mobile home community and a Mexican *ranchito* were not visible in Google maps, which shows the implications of invisibility of rural spaces or low-income neighborhoods in two nation-states. In Marva’s study, the political and ideological space of her school sanctioned the acknowledgement of racial differences, when her colleagues mentioned “I don’t see color,” and her study participant pool had to shift to avoid race matter discussions. In Silvia’s and Marva’s studies, erasure and visibility were central constructs in whether or not participants’ identities and regions or origin could or should be represented in digital ways. However, in all three studies, participants found ways to use digital resources to make visible their connections to place and racial identities: Latinx mothers assembled images of multiple landmarks around their hometowns, and biracial children used the color palette in ways that represented their racial identities. Through these oral and multimodal counter narratives, participants’ voices, limitations, and dominant assumptions about the spaces and practices mattered in their communities.

As literacy researchers who aim to establish participatory and reciprocal relationships with the communities described above, we negotiate multiple roles coming in as digital literacy “experts.” However, we find that digital resources were valuable mediating tools to illuminate our understanding of social space and identity in urban and rural regions in Georgia and Texas. While we may serve as mentors or facilitators in the use of digital media production resources, we aim to understand how and why these resources may be of use (or not) to the families and students we work with. Through this process, we problematize assumptions about technology as

the “great equalizer” in technological determinism narratives (Warschauer, 2003), and illustrating how participants understand and address digital inequality.

We have shared stories of three different places in the south, all where the researchers found the implications of race embedded into the very fabric of the community – from infrastructure to social expectations. These implications shaped the researcher, interactions between researchers and subjects, and even the research product. The narratives told here call for further studies on barriers to digital equality (i.e., the luxury of internet choice being unavailable in neighborhoods of color or appearing invisible on Google maps) and their effect on the communities in the south. A closer exploration of how the intersections of race, space, and place should shape the data and outcomes of literacy research concerning communities of color.

The three studies presented here provide a hopeful, inspirational picture of how digital literacies can be a tool for navigating the limits of space, race, and place. Most of the participants found the counter-stories they wanted to tell through digital tools. Yet, the three researcher’s counter-stories may serve as a warning to future researchers of color that their output can be distorted by those same limits. Finally, this piece provides awareness to researchers of all ethnicities that the digital terrain they travel is one where issues of race, place, and space are critical considerations when studying and reporting digital literacy research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Notes

1. The term Latinx is an inclusive term of all gender identities (instead of the binary identities in Latino/Latina/Latin@). This term will be used to describe persons with origin to countries in Latin America.
2. The *Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project* was funded by the National Council of Teachers of English’s Research Foundation.

3. *Family Literacy - Clase de Computación Project* was funded by the University of Georgia Research Foundation.

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