

# “Wearing Only Our Skin”: the multimodal literacies classroom as a living arrangement

Multimodal  
literacies  
classroom

Angie Zapata

*Department of Learning, Teaching and Curriculum,  
University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA, and*

Monica C. Kleekamp

*Department of Speech-Language Pathology, Maryville University,  
St. Louis, Missouri, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Literacy research exploring multimodal composition and justice-oriented children’s literature each have rich landscapes and histories. This paper aims to add to both of these bodies of scholarship through the emerging assemblage of Studio F, a fifth-grade classroom. The authors share poststructural analytic encounters with attention to the unexpected multimodal relationships and the justice-oriented talk and texts that emerged, as well as the classroom conditions that produce them.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors think with assemblage theory to examine the newness that emerged as one small group of students wrestled with the emerging instances of racism present in *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles.

**Findings** – Together, the living arrangement of bodies, materials and discourses created openings for students’ explorations of race and racism.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers teachers and researchers space to rethink what is possible in the literacy classroom when the authors re-envision classrooms as vibrant assemblages, support emergent multimodal composing processes and follow students’ critical encounters toward justice-oriented literacies.

**Keywords** Literacy, Assemblage theory, Literacy teaching, English language arts, Multimodal literacies, Picturebook instruction

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Nestled into pods of desks in Classroom Studio F, students listen intently as they experience the final pages of the picturebook biography, *The Starry Messenger* (Sis, 1996). Double-page, illustrated portrayals of astrologer Galileo Galilei project from a screen as Wendy, the teacher, simultaneously reads aloud from the hardback picturebook steadied between her thumb and index finger. Curiosity and emotion, as expressed through bodies and voices, permeate this literacy space as students discuss Galileo’s grand contributions to science and consider his perseverance when faced with excommunication for his beliefs.

As is customary in Studio F, in addition to the talk, students entered multimodal text-making for literacy learning. On this day, opera framed students’ explorations of themes expressed in *The Starry Messenger* and other picturebook portrayals of visionaries and activists flooding the room. Through writing, music, talk and movement, bodies spring into



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action, with some settling into seats at tables, others standing and some sprawling out on the floor alongside picturebooks, *librettos* and pencils. Studio F is animated with voices, drumming, writing, materials and explorations of justice and activism as students draft lyrics in notebooks and then erase, perform and write again.

Within this article, we present how justice-oriented, multimodal literacies emerged in a 5th grade classroom we call Studio F. Specifically, we feature analyses of the multimodal relationships that compose youth-centric practices by focusing not just on youth themselves but also the lively relationships among youth and other materials and discursive matter in the classroom. In doing so, we aim to expand understandings of the pedagogical conditions that produce multimodal text-making and justice-oriented texts as emerging with/through an assemblage.

### **Conceptualizing multimodal justice-oriented classrooms through assemblage theory**

As highlighted in the opening vignette, the familiar constellation of the visual (e.g. picturebook illustrations), aural (e.g. talk, music), embodied (e.g. bodies performing) and affectual (e.g. curiosity, emotion) in Studio F enlivens students' literacy encounters with justice-oriented picturebooks and opera. This dynamic and purposeful multimodal grouping of human and nonhuman bodies is what we describe as an assemblage or a "living arrangement" (Buchanan, 2015; DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 2004). Assemblage theory provides a generative framework to describe multimodal literacies and how relationships among such resources as people, things, signs, sounds and affect come to matter in the classroom.

Thinking with assemblage theory, we theorize the multimodal literacies among youth in Studio F as a lively arrangement composed of dynamic relationships or an assemblage. As educators and researchers, thinking with assemblage theory shifts our analytic and pedagogical gaze toward the relational and togetherness of materiality (e.g. students' bodies, tools) and discourses (e.g. beliefs and tacit understandings) to consider how multimodal literacies are a part of a wider set of living arrangements. Using Buchanan's (2015) metaphor, we theorize 5th grade classroom Studio F:

In terms of a "musical arrangement", much in the way of adapting an abstract plan of music to a particular performer and performance. The assemblage is therefore purposeful, it is not simply a happenstance collocation of people, materials and actions, but the deliberate realisation of a distinctive plan (abstract machine). (p. 130)

Through this paper, the multimodal and justice-oriented literacies experienced in Studio F are theorized as an assemblage – an ongoing process or harmony (and at times cacophony) of literacies, language, bodies, modalities and meanings coming to be. Through this lens, the teacher and students are read as being in relationships with the materiality and discourses of the classroom studio space. We, therefore, focus not on set activities around a multimodal tool or the teacher, but the lively arrangement of human and nonhuman bodies, as well as the newness (e.g. new texts, processes, thinking) made possible from this vibrant assemblage. Doing so helps us consider both the possibilities of multimodal tools and the conditions under which youth enter relationships with these tools for multimodal text-making.

Much of the research on multimodality in schools has historically focused on the "modal" aspect of the term, rightfully suggesting the importance of the modality or of the tool itself when in use under certain conditions. Recently, however, growing importance has also been given to how multimodal arrangements of different matter, such as students' bodies, tools and discourses,

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come to mean *together* in the classroom (Zapata *et al.*, 2018; Kuby and Rucker, 2015; Leander and Ehret, 2019; Schmidt and Beucher, 2020). To experience Studio F in this way, we separate multimodal literacies from the idea of a fixed, linear process to a fluid process/product that emerges under certain conditions with certain tools (Lenters, 2018; Medina, 2010; Wargo, 2018). As illustrated in the opening vignette, multimodal literacies are inherent and rhizomatic (Leander and Rowe, 2006) in Studio F, unfolding and emergent across the relations of reading picturebooks, composing operas, participating in literature discussions and more.

Conceptualizing multimodal literacies as a more dynamic and rhizomatic process/product remains in stark contrast to the prescriptive literacy practices often mandated in schools where standardized English-only, print literacies are privileged (Rowell and Walsh, 2011; Serafini, 2015; Zapata and Laman, 2016). This research inquiry provides classroom data and analyses to think with and reconceptualize classrooms as multimodal and justice-oriented spaces.

### **Justice-oriented encounters through multimodal text-making**

Assemblage theory is not only a promising lens to help us experience the possibilities of multimodality but also can help us advance ethical and justice-oriented work as a way of being and doing, not simply an isolated unit of study to enact (Zapata *et al.*, 2019). An enduring body of research has long made clear the important relationship between multimodal and social justice literacies to highlight how meaning making across semiotic resources can produce viable pathways for students to interrogate the relationships among language, media, identity, materiality, race and power in ways that alphabetic print alone cannot make possible (Albers *et al.*, 2015; de los Río, 2018; Ghiso and Low, 2013; Lewison, 2017; Wissman *et al.*, 2012). The scholarship in social justice literacies emphasizes how interrogating power relationships is not necessarily a content area in literacy classrooms, but a stance we embody through our teaching, guided by deeper purposes and processes for making for a better world (Bomer and Bomer, 2001; Vasquez, 2014).

Assemblage theory, therefore, makes for a robust framework for this analysis. Conceptualizing Studio F as a living arrangement that is purposeful, lively and generative considers both the relational and emergent multimodal productions in a classroom (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 2004; Leander and Boldt, 2012; Lenters, 2018) and allows us to note what justice-oriented openings emerge. Assemblage theory demands that we attend to the fidelity of an ongoing process, rather than hold still and freeze a linear process or product for analysis. Attending to what new justice-oriented texts/text processes came to be in Studio F positioned us as a collaborative teacher and researcher inquiry team to attend to what material, discursive and multimodal relationships were being lived out in the classroom and what issues of power (i.e. racism, standardization of tools) were (and were not) entering relationships with children composing texts.

Rethinking multimodal and justice-oriented literacies in this way, for this article, we ask the following: What are the material and discursive resources in Studio F? How are they arranged? What new multimodal texts, texts processes and justice-oriented explorations were made possible? These guiding inquiry questions help us to step into the classroom conditions of Studio F as a living arrangement within openings for justice-oriented literacies.

Given the importance of conceptualizing Studio F as an assemblage, we begin by detailing first the material and discursive relations of the studio space and overview the research design shaping this inquiry. We then feature critical encounters that emerged from the assemblage and invite readers to experience what unfolded in Studio F among a small group of students composing operas. As we *think with* assemblage theory (Jackson and

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Mazzei, 2012), we thread analyses throughout the narrative findings, highlighting the conditions producing as follows:

- Studio F as a living, multimodal arrangement.
- The explorations of race, racism and power that emerged.

We conclude with questions as provocations focused on what was made possible in Studio F to provide guidance for teachers and researchers interested in how such multimodal spaces produce new and important openings for justice-oriented literacies.

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### **Inquiring into studio F as the method**

*Research design: studio F as a site of teacher-researcher collaborative inquiry*

Existing in a stand-alone, temporary and portable trailer, Studio F houses Wendy's 5th grade classroom at Mariposa Elementary School (school, teacher and children's names are pseudonyms). Mariposa Elementary is a neighborhood elementary school in the Midwest USA with a public expressive arts initiative whereby teachers contribute to an integrated arts approach across the content areas. Together, Angie and Monica entered Studio F with Wendy to immerse ourselves in a collaborative research inquiry focused on understanding the conditions for teaching with justice-oriented picturebooks in elementary classrooms. We conceptualize justice-oriented picturebooks as texts with both illustrated and written portrayals of protagonists working toward a better world.

Both Angie and Monica bring personal and professional commitments to teaching and research of diverse representation in children's literature. Wendy is an experienced teacher bringing both a commitment to justice-oriented literacies and expertise in arts-based integration in elementary classrooms. Our teacher-researcher collaborative inquiry began as she expressed an interest in integrating a justice-orientation in her classroom, particularly through picturebooks. Wendy's commitment to arts integration education, her students and our research collaboration is not necessarily the focus of this analysis, but the histories she, her students and we each brought to the space are part of the living arrangement encountered in Studio F. Her role in the inquiry included planning and enacting instruction, participating in monthly professional learning meetings and contributing to ongoing data analysis to determine next steps in instruction.

*Research context: the liveliness of studio F as a site for opera exploration*

Even before our collaboration, Studio F was a lively and vibrant learning space. Within Studio F, the walls are lined with student-authored projects. Scattered about the space atop tables and in corners are projects such as looms for weaving and finished pottery samples. The students move about freely, working together or individually in desks, on bean bags, lying on their stomachs on the floor or from rocking chairs. Each time the group gathers, students participate eagerly, take risks, try out new ideas, sing, dance and move in front of one another without hesitation. The engagement in the room is visceral, as expressed through students' bodies and talk.

A particularly relevant relation in Studio F for this research was the growing attention to justice-oriented literature. Leading up to the intensive study of opera and throughout the school year, Wendy integrated literature depicting issues of equity, diversity, race and linguistic diversity. As Wendy began teaching a unit on opera, students were immersed daily in book floods composed of biographies of activists and narratives of activist movements. To explore opera as a genre, Wendy and her students studied the literacies and grammar of opera as a multimodal experience – attending to staging, embodied expressions, the tenor of voices, lyrics and the rhythm of narrative structures. Students watched and

discussed video clips of popular operas, such as *La Traviata*, alongside social justice picturebooks such as *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017) and *The Case for Loving: The Fight for Interracial Marriage* (Alka, 2015).

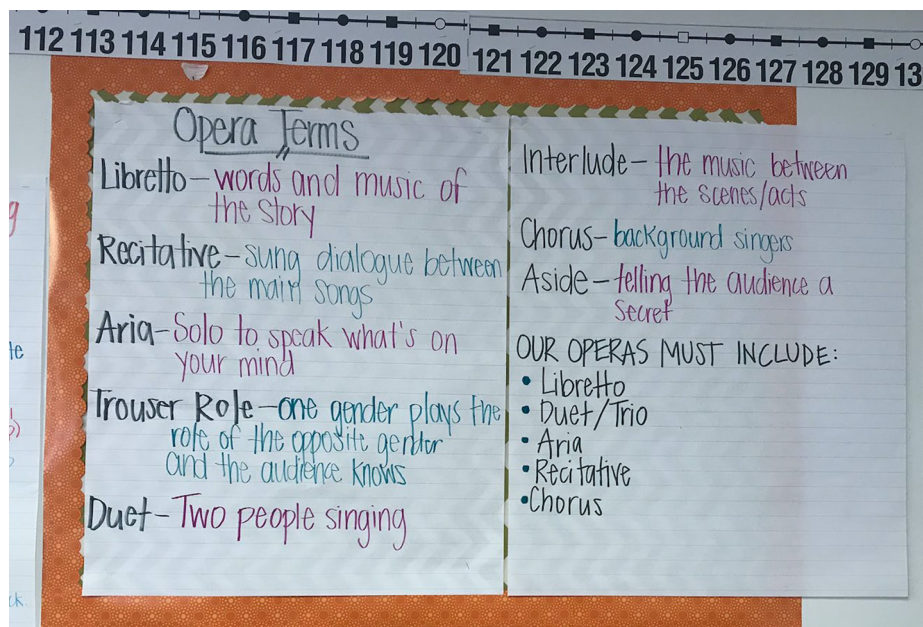
Beyond whole group invitations, students explored picturebooks individually and in four small groups. Dedicated time with iPads, texts, musical instruments, writing materials and each other was carved out daily as students read and composed their own operas and responded to activist-themed picturebooks. The social justice themes in the literature seeped into students' operas with each group identifying one picturebook to think with as they composed. Each group identified and inquired into a particular activist movement (e.g. women's rights, interracial relationships) and composed an opera focused on that inquiry.

Opera learning permeated students' semi-weekly music class as the music teacher helped students explore lyrical composition. After writing, editing and revising lyrics, students took their compositions to music class to layer melody into their pieces. The work culminated in opera groups performing for a public audience of other 5th grade classrooms, teachers, staff and parents.

*Pedagogical conditions: embodied genre explorations of justice-oriented literature*

Here, we also highlight the pedagogical conditions that relationally produced multimodal texts among students and Wendy's instruction as revealed through analysis focused on Studio F as a lively arrangement. Wendy often remarked to students as they rehearsed their operas, "How can our body help to tell the story a little bit more?" As one student shared during the composition process, "We were really confused on what we were going to write for our words, so Ms Anthony (Wendy) gave us this idea to act it out".

Learning the various opera components (Plate 1), in particular, was an embodied learning experience. Wendy called upon students to use their bodies and voices to



**Plate 1.**  
Learning the various  
components of an  
opera in Studio F

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perform and develop their understanding of opera-related terms. For example, to transition into their literacy block, Wendy would frequently name an opera term and students would use their voices and bodies to perform their understanding of the term.

“Ok, duets”, Wendy stated. Immediately, students’ hands went up and faced each other, as though representing the mouths of two different speakers. “Blah blah blah” and “Blah, blah blah” said the students as their hands talked to one another.

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“Aside”, said Wendy as all of the students raised their hands to their mouths and pretended to whisper.

“Aria”, Wendy said as she transitioned to the next term. Briefly, the students paused, remembering how they had come to represent this term in their acting. After quickly recalling the information, the students returned to whispering to one another, waiting for Wendy to call out a specific name. “Emma”, Wendy called [..]

“Aria”, Emma sang, with her voice moving melodically over the class murmuring. As she sang, the students directed their attention to her and smiled.

The multimodal and particularly, the embodied learning in Studio F is vital to understanding the “living arrangement” articulated in this article. Freedom to move and perform with bodies, voices and the materials readily available in the space drove the familiar, multimodal ways of being and doing for literacy learning in Studio F. Moreover, with the freedom to think with their bodies, materials and instruments, the openness among students to work through difficult topics and personal experiences became more palpable.

We have highlighted here particular aspects of Studio F such as the materiality of the space, the multimodal (particularly the embodied and aural) habits of learning, the literature, opera, themes of activism, the teacher and students to help readers experience Studio F as a relation. As [Jones and Spector \(2017\)](#) explain about spaces, the environment itself – physical space, materials, organized and open-oriented practices and discourse practices – is an active contributor to what comes to be in space. Together, the materiality and discourses of Studio F produced a rich and dynamic assemblage for justice-oriented explorations to emerge.

#### *Data production and analysis in studio F*

Data produced in Studio F over the course of six weeks included audio/video recorded observations, field notes, teacher and student artifacts and documented reflective conversations with Wendy. We identified a process of *thinking with* assemblage theory to be a generative way to map the classroom conditions for multimodal text production in Studio F ([Jackson and Mazzei, 2012](#)). From our initial process of *thinking with* and “plugging in” data-theory, two openings in the data emerged: the unexpected intersections of the aural, embodied and material that produced multimodal literacies, and the emerging departures into literature discussions of race and racism.

The analysis that follows focuses on these multimodal moments and relationships (the conditions) that produce justice-oriented, multimodal texts in Studio F. As we made these cuts in the data, the data were “plugged-in” to assemblage theory again. For example, as we entered the data focused on one small group composing their opera, we encountered unexpected, but critical relationships and synergies among students’ bodies, the literature,

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talk, race, affect, Wendy's guidance and so much more. In the narrative findings that follow, we share these poststructural analytic encounters with attention to the unexpected multimodal relationships and the justice-oriented talk and texts that emerged, as well as the classroom conditions that produce them.

### **A critical encounter with race in studio F**

*"Wearing Only Our Skins [. . .]": multimodal literacies with justice-oriented literature*

As students work in small groups composing their operas, Studio F is alive with instruments humming, *librettos* being filled with lyrics, voices singing, the illustrations of picturebooks being read and students blocking their opera performances with their bodies. The space is buzzing with focused commitment.

Wendy joins the group composing an opera around the text, *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles (2001). *Freedom Summer* explores the friendship of two young characters, John Henry, who is Black and Joe, who is white, in the wake of recent desegregation laws in 1964 Mississippi. As Wendy sits on the floor and leans in, she tells students that she'd like to read *Freedom Summer* with them. Hundui, Nesreen, Aaron, Joshua and Quenton respond enthusiastically in agreement and gather their notebooks in their laps to prepare for the read aloud.

Like all of the students in Studio F, Hundui, Nesreen, Aaron, Joshua and Quenton bring diverse sociocultural histories. As sons and daughters of immigrant, working and middle class families, speakers of more than one language, children with bodies that are marked in society by particular phenotypes and dress, students of a white, middle class educator teaching for social justice, members of different religious faiths and as residents (who may or may not be documented) of the USA in an era of extreme xenophobia and racism, the students bring an array of experiences and knowings that have over time become part of Studio F. Talk of politics, race and racism were already a part of backchannel conversations among the students as a result but had yet to be explicitly named in Studio F.

Before beginning to read the picturebook aloud, Wendy shares the author's note that details her experiences as a white child in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. The book grew out of the author's feelings in response to the civil right efforts to organize Freedom Summer, a movement to encourage Black Americans to vote and her wonderings about how Black children her own age might feel as they encountered racism at that time.

After Wendy reads the author's note, Nesreen moves her body forward in the circle to share her response:

"The way that she [Deborah] wrote it made me feel like you were in the story. Like this is happening to you [. . .] she kept writing 'I was born as a child' and I was picturing like how it would look in my mind."

"How did it look like in your mind?" Wendy asked.

"Um, so, it looked like, everything was like white only and over there (she points with her hands to one side of the room) and Black people had to go somewhere else". Nesreen motions her hands to the opposite side of the room:

"Ok, what do you guys think about that?" Asks Wendy.

Quenton adds, "I think she's feeling like, what would she [. . .] what would the white feel like if they were in Black people's shoes?"

"So she's trying to take on the perspective of somebody from a different race?" asks Wendy:

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“I think that’s her message”, Nesreen adds. “Like of the whole story, that probably would be her message at the end”.

“Ok, so she wanted to write from the perspective of somebody who wants to understand the situation more”, Wendy adds in response. “And she’s also maybe writing it for people who went through those feelings or possibly are going through that situation *now*”.

Like most literature discussions in Studio F, Nesreen thinks with her body and her visualizations to express her feelings of empathy and to make meaning of print and illustration. Reading *Freedom Summer* with Studio F, however, also provided an important opening, what we are calling a *critical encounter*, to explore different perspectives around race and racism.

Wendy continues reading the text with students, sharing the illustrations on each page as students jot and draw their responses in their notebooks. They enter the part of the narrative where John Henry and Joe find the pool filled with asphalt. Although the city pool has technically been desegregated, they realize they cannot share the first day of swimming together. Disappointed, the two head to a local creek where they have been swimming for years. Wendy reads, “We holler and jump in wearing only our skin”.

Quenton pulls his head back off of his fists where it had been resting. Wendy notices his body change and asks, “Tell me why you did that!”:

“Well, they had a whole swimming spot and just them two, so I was kind of like shocked. Like they must be really good swimmers. And he’s doing all this just so they can play together”.

Nesreen sits up straighter and adds:

“I just noticed that they said, ‘wearing only their skin’ [. . .] I think she’s trying to prove a point that they’re just doing that [. . .] she did that on purpose so that she could prove that it doesn’t matter what your skin color is [. . .]”.

“So, she chose the words, this phrase, ‘only our skin’ really deliberately. She wanted to use the word skin because she’s talking about differences in skin color and differences in treating people?” Wendy asks.

“Mmmhmmm”, Nesreen nods enthusiastically.

Wendy continues to read aloud as students inspect the illustrations, continue the discussion and take notes. In response, more noticings around skin color emerge in their talk. Students’ bodies shift in position and their voices become more animated as they ponder what had been done to the town pool. Suddenly, the topic of segregation dominates the conversation and bodies become livelier. The intensity of the moment compels Wendy to explicitly name racism. She states, “So, maybe, whoever is in charge of the pool or whoever is in charge of the city government has this racist outlook on Black people?”:

“Yeah,” Joshua responds.

Quenton, after looking down at his notebook for the duration of this exchange, looks up and explains, “Maybe it’s just like what I said about *The Starry Messenger*. What babies see is what they do. So, if a white baby was born and they see other people that look like them be mean to Black people, then they think it’s right.

“So, like the kids do what the parents want them to do and kind of are an example and so the kids follow them,” Aaron adds quietly.

Reading the stillness and power of the moment, Wendy calms her body as well to say:



“So the kids follow parents because your parent is your first teacher, right? They teach you so many things before you ever come to school. And parents might have taught their child to treat another person in a poor way, because that’s what they were taught.”

Talk of race, racism, skin color, segregation and why they exist emerged from a lively relationship among multiple picturebooks, bodies and visualizations and habits of multimodal meaning making in Studio F. This critical encounter produces new possibilities among students, including an open forum in a classroom space to discuss racism as it is unexpectedly named. The analysis here enlivens the ebb and flow between lively bodies and stillness as a critical encounter emerges. The assemblage animates the line, “wearing only our skin” as it becomes a new text explicitly attached to countering racism and part of the multimodal text-making that unfolds the next day as students composed their operas.

*An emerging composing process: feeling with/through the multimodal text making*

Thinking with *Freedom Summer* as the narrative for their opera, the students negotiate what important aspects they will include from the story. Thinking with assemblage theories and the data urges attention to how their bodies, their voices, picturebooks, instruments, iPads and a commitment to crafting a justice-oriented opera produce fruitful conditions for collaborative multimodal composition. As Wendy walks by again, she notes how the book is tagged with multiple sticky notes signaling key moments students identified in the narrative. Wendy had encouraged students to select specific lines of the book they found to be important. She reminds them that they highlighted the part of the text about “skin” in the early part of the book.

As the group continues, Nesreen jumps up with her hands up to spontaneously sing aloud melodically, “Let’s swim with our shorts and our skin!” Her group members chuckle as she inserts humor into their brainstorming process. Each time she contributes, Nesreen uses her hands and melodic intonation, singing nearly every time. The rest of her group members, Joshua, Hundui, Quenton and Aaron make their contributions, though rarely using bodies and voices in the same way. None, however, appear distracted by Nesreen’s meaning making processes as using body and voice were common practices in Studio F.

Collectively, the group agrees to work on the aria and aim to compose the lyrics with blocking should they have time for it. They decide that John Henry’s character will sing the aria for the performance and focus on crafting the words first and then the melody to follow. Locating the aria in scene five, the group discusses the lyrics and message of the aria. After some negotiation, Nesreen immediately begins with more specific ideas.

“Right now, we really need to think about like how he was feeling in that moment. Because he was sad, but what kind of level of sad?” Nesreen asks:

“He can be angry-sad,” Aaron responds.

Joshua immediately finds and holds up the picturebook spread featuring a zoomed-in view of John Henry’s face. The illustration is somber and animates the hurt John Henry is experiencing as he realizes he cannot go swimming with his friend. Nesreen lifts a specific line from the accompanying text as she reads, “John Henry’s eyes filled with angry tears.” Stillness and quietness once again consume the moment.

“So he’s mad and sad at the same time,” Joshua affirmatively states.

Having identified an emotion to think with for their aria, Joshua impulsively begins singing the words of the aria through an impromptu melody. “It was making me angry [. . .]” he sings with his head tilted upward. Eventually, Joshua pauses and chuckles to himself, seemingly unclear if this is the direction the group had planned on going with the aria.

“Yeah, that’s actually good,” Aaron offers. Quenton continues singing a few more words to add to Joshua’s spontaneous aria. While Nesreen holds this same spread of the book up, group members talk and move simultaneously to generate lyrics and melodies. Joshua begins writing down some of their ideas using pencil and paper in their *libretto*. The students move fluidly between the picturebook, writing and singing lyrics as they craft John Henry’s emotion through song. Clearly, the meanings and feelings attached to “skin”, race and racism surface as important texts.

This is the multimodal composing process that emerges in Studio F. Students did not necessarily enter a predetermined, linear process to craft their opera, but a fluid and spontaneous flow of language, song, bodies, emotion, illustrations and all that makes Studio F a living arrangement. Wendy does not provide a step-by-step composing process. Instead, Wendy follows students’ critical encounter with “wearing only our skins” and nudges students toward the materials and ideas available as needed. She reads not only the texts they are crafting on paper but also reads their bodies and affect as they navigate the critical encounter.

*“Skin” – movement-bodies-song-affect*

We emphasize here an important detail Studio F offers as a multimodal space. When students are composing, it is as loud as it is busy. Students are engaged in multiple projects and a few materials (large and small, both heavy and heavier) occupy nooks and crannies. They sit at tables, on the floor or stand. In addition, yet even in this incredibly loud and very full trailer, children continue to think together through their voices, their bodies and song, not distracted by the busy-ness of the living arrangement.

As the group continues to compose, students stress that they want “our music to match our lyrics.” Students move beyond simply sitting to write. They also explore the tone of the aria, questioning how their voices need to match the emotion. They consider whether the aria should be in major or minor. “Minor”, Joshua responds. For the group, this means their voices should take a deeper tone to mirror John Henry’s emotion.

On the following day, Wendy asks, “So, why is John Henry going to sing this aria?”

“Like, because, he’s very angry that he can’t do what Joe can do. Like, he finally got his chance to swim in this pool, the pool for all white people, but now he can’t because they closed it”, answers Quenton standing up as he holds his hand in a fist.

“And he like finally can [ . . . ] it’s not just because of the law. He figured out that the people themselves didn’t like the idea of them being there. They liked the way it used to be”, Nesreen adds. Her body is still and confident.

“So basically, they’re not following the law because they’re closing it down,” interjects Joshua.

“In order to not break the law. Because, they didn’t necessarily say you can’t swim in it but [ . . . ]” Wendy clarifies:

“But they closed it,” finishes Jeremy.

“They can change the law, but they can’t change the people,” concludes Nesreen.

Wendy adds:

So, he was excited to go swimming with his friend, but he’s upset because the pool’s closed. You got that part. But why else are his eyes filling up with angry tears? He’s not just sad. He’s angry as you noticed. Why is he angry? Why else are we writing this aria? What else does he wanna say in this aria?

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Nesreen moves her body forward as she explains:

I have the right to do this so why can't I do it? He's sad because he has the right to do everything he wants [...] he always had it, but now he understands the hate in people and he gets really angry.

"I have the right [...]" begins Joshua.

Composing an aria with their bodies and voices while focused on John Henry's feelings allowed students to experience the tensions surrounding segregation and the complexity of interracial friendship in 1964. Through movement, song and talk, students experienced a new understanding of John Henry's emotions, feelings and perspectives on racism and injustice.

As Wendy leaves, she encourages the group to compose thoughtfully so that John Henry's "words are as strong as his feelings." She adds:

And one thing that you can also do to strengthen your aria is to think about your blocking. So, if your words are really strong, think about what the audience would *see* when they hear this aria [...] because this painting [looking to John Henry's face in the picturebook], I feel like when I look at it, to me, I better understand him. Because, I see just him. I don't see anything else. I feel his feelings when I look at this picture [...] remember, it's words and movements together tell your story.

Wendy's attention to the way language, feelings, bodies and movement tell a multimodal story nudges the group to explore what movements Joshua might pair with the words to the aria. Hundui takes the written document from Joshua and begins adding it to the script.

Through this steady, multimodal flow of sound, instruments, movement, language and more, Joshua crosses out some words, erases others and adds to the words he's written so far. While Joshua writes, Nesreen stands, moving her arms and swaying as she sings parts of the lyrics, thinking through how the aria should look and feel. Aaron suggests that they also bring instruments into their process and Nesreen leaves to gather some. Together, the group experiments with a drum, xylophone, maracas and cymbals, trying on different sounds and beats with the same lyrics.

Over and over, the group adds different beats with different instruments, playing with tempo to compose their aria. Through this multimodal flow of their bodies, movements, instruments and sounds in Studio F, students volunteer an aria, a musical arrangement laden with visceral emotion and justice-oriented perspectives. The depth and the nuance of an interracial friendship animated in the aria was clear and experienced in a way that standardized, English-only print alone could not have achieved.

## Discussion and implications

*Considering possibilities: classroom spaces as vibrant assemblages*

Given our understandings of Studio F as an assemblage, we look not just at students' responses to picturebooks or how students use multimodal platforms but also what is produced in this classroom as children, picturebooks, justice-oriented themes, opera, sounds, materials, emotions and more become together. When we understand classroom spaces as living arrangements, we can experience Studio F as a dynamic and generative multimodal literacy space.

Siegel (2012), reminds us that:

Now is the time to learn more about how teachers and students are talking and theorizing multimodality if we hope to talk back to the accountability culture that has kept a tight rein on literacy (p. 678).

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In the wake of a continued focus on narrow literacy outcomes, classrooms can often be spaces that prescribe the kinds of literacies that silence students' voices and their bodies and fail to grow students' literacy lives oriented toward a better world.

We feature Studio F to show what is possible when classroom spaces are reimagined as vibrant multimodal assemblages and seek to understand the conditions that produce multimodal literacies. Studio F is enlivened through singing and drumming and writing in notebooks for lyrics and erasing lines of text and rewriting together. They discuss. They share. They work through issues of race and racism. Cymbals play. Drums sound. Voices sing. Wendy moves throughout the room and confers with each group. She is calm in this space that may appear chaotic to an outsider. Studio F is simultaneously fluid and unfinished, always becoming. Recognizing that not all educators experience the same autonomy with the curriculum as Studio F, we offer questions as provocations for teachers as they reimagine their classrooms as lively multimodal spaces.

*What is made possible when I rethink my classroom as a living arrangement?* Reimagining the literacy classroom as a living arrangement asks teachers and researchers to consider new possibilities for the classroom and to rethink the space as a relation rather than a collection of things and people. To understand Studio F as an assemblage means experiencing it purely in terms of the kinds of multimodal arrangements and processes it makes possible and even more importantly, the set of multimodal literacy habits and mindsets it entails.

In the initial work of composing an aria, students encountered a number of multimodal possibilities. Play among lyrics, tone, John Henry's illustrated face, emotion, bodies and instruments again and again shaped this lively relation. The multimodal composing process was not lived out as a prescribed step-by-step process, but one that emerged from play, exploration and trying out possibilities made available through Studio F. Although not all students entered embodied multimodal literacies with the same gusto, students who did urged new openings for literacy learning. This lively arrangement made possible justice-oriented explorations that may not have evolved under different conditions.

*In what ways do I, the teacher, contribute to the multimodal relationships in my classroom?* We cannot ignore Wendy's instruction as part of the lively arrangement producing multimodal texts in Studio F. Wendy guides students to work with more than print. She encourages them to think with their bodies as a meaning making tool, to perform meaning and feelings. She nudges students to consider how meanings are communicated through more than language, such as sound, movement and illustration. Much like a fellow composer in the classroom, Wendy encourages students to enter play and innovation as a multimodal composing process. She entered the lively arrangement and guided students as they navigated critical encounters.

In doing so, the new processes and texts that emerge in Studio F are valued as legitimate and meaningful. Considering our role as teachers and researchers in such spaces nudges us to think of multimodal literacies as innovation and play, rather than a pre-determined process that would limit the kinds of multimodal texts and meanings possible. Such a position would ask that we assess or learn from, students' modal dexterity or how fluidly they navigate thinking with several tools for multimodal composing processes rather than merely following commands or completing steps. It also asks that we "be with" students as they enter critical counters and read the affect produced as data to inform our next steps as teachers.

*What relationships are made possible in my classroom among students, their bodies, their voices, literature, social-justice discourses and the materials we have available?* Because multimodal literacies were already a part of Studio F, students were comfortable making

meaning beyond talk and print. Literacies were reproduced as embodied and lived, making encounters with justice-oriented ideas palpable and visceral. What was produced was an embodied exploration of emotion, racism and interracial friendship. The critical encounter with “skin” asked students to enter into the perspective of two boys navigating an interracial friendship in 1964 Mississippi.

In a continued socio-political climate of xenophobia and police brutality, classroom living arrangements like Studio F are needed to explore difficult conversations, including race and racism, with students. Recognizing that students have justice-oriented experiences within and outside of school, believing that the classroom is a controlled space free of race or racism is a misnomer. Teaching for social justice is not a unit of study to enact, but a daily possibility to take up through authentic encounters with literature, friendships, current events, in ways that awaken and do not cause harm. Following students’ critical encounters into justice-oriented discussions demands that we are mindful of the inquiries, feelings, curiosities and opinions that develop about race, racism and equity as students explore them with/through multimodal literacies.

Re-envisioning classrooms as vibrant assemblages, embracing the emergent multimodal composing processes and flows and following students’ critical encounters toward justice-oriented literacies asks teachers and researchers to reimagine what is possible in the literacy classroom and how classrooms are constituted by a harmony of literacies, languages, bodies, modalities, emotions and meanings coming to be.

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### About the authors

Angie Zapata, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Language and Literacies for Social Transformation Program at the University of Missouri. Her primary area of research centers on multimodal and multilingual literacies in K-12 literature-based classrooms. Angie Zapata is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [zapatam@missouri.edu](mailto:zapatam@missouri.edu)

Monica C. Kleekamp, PhD, CCC-SLP is an Assistant Professor of Speech-Language Pathology at Maryville University. Her primary area of research focuses on disrupting deficit notions of dis/ability through the theoretical lenses of neurological queerness and expansive literacies. Monica Kleekamp can be contacted at: [mkleekamp@maryville.edu](mailto:mkleekamp@maryville.edu)

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