On the Violence of and to Words—How Does Language Matter Now?

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Framing Language—Framing Words

> Socrates said, "The misuse of language induces evil in the soul." He wasn't talking about grammar. To misuse language is to use it the way politicians and advertisers do, for profit, without taking responsibility for what the words mean. Language used as a means to get power or make money goes wrong: it lies. Language used as an end in itself, to sing a poem or tell a story, goes right, goes towards the truth. A writer, for example, is a person who cares what words mean, what they say, how they say it. Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight. By using words well, they strengthen their souls. Storytellers and poets spend their lives learning that skill and art of using words well. And their words make the souls of their readers stronger, brighter, deeper.
>
> —Ursula K. Le Guin[1]

In a short post entitled "A letter to a young writer" on her website, Le Guin argued that when people, including politicians and advertisers, use language for profit "without taking responsibility for what the words mean" (n.d.), that is misuse. Le Guin talks about "misuse," but we, the *RTE* editors, also view it as *abuse*. While "misuse" might refer to ignorance or lack of communicative competency, what concerns us goes beyond "misuse" to malevolence and evil; it is abusive.

Moreover, Le Guin argues that a "writer is a person who cares what words mean, what they say, how they say it. Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight" (n.d.), which, in our view, also applies to teachers and researchers. In other words, language matters to us as writers, teachers, and researchers of the teaching and learning of literacy, literature, and the language arts, and it matters to us as editors of this journal. As the editors of *RTE,* along with many teachers, research-

ers, and writers, we believe that language and words are the building blocks of knowledge and knowing, imagination both in and through literature and poetry, religion, politics, art, and social relationships, among so much else.

In this essay, we reflect upon the use and abuse of language and words at this particular time in US history in education and in scholarship. Our reflections scare us, and perhaps they will scare you as well. The first step, we believe, is to identify what it is that is scaring us, which by itself is not enough, but it is a first step that needs to be taken in public.

Du Bois (2011) (as cited in Strauss and Feiz, 2014) notes, "It is through language, we shape our own relation to a socially organized life world, one where the verbal calibration of diverse perceptions becomes part of the negotiation of ongoing social life" (p. 3). People often reflect on words, deconstruct and reconstruct them, and use them as best they can to create beauty, affection, caring, family, knowledge, and knowing, and those shared insights that make our lives together have the promise of justice, freedom, and—to borrow from John Coltrane—*a love supreme*.[2] For those of us who study words and language, we can apprehend a history of inquiry and reflection beginnings even before ancient hermeneutics that flow through philology, linguistic, the Bakhtin circle, Wittgensteinian linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, anthropological linguistics, the study of rhetoric, the sociology of language, translation studies, semiotics, critical discourse analysis, and so much more.

As teachers and researchers, we have a deep belief in the "mid-wifery properties" of words (cf., Morrison, 1993) to open "up new ways of being, knowing, seeing, and relating to ourselves and to others" (Blackburn et al., 2023, p. 5), and we heed the warnings in Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech about the abuse of language for "menace and subjugation" and the violent potential of words; these days, so many researchers and teachers, including ourselves, feel this in our bones. Morrison explains:

> Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; it does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek - it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison, 1993)

Morrison issues a call for obscure, commodified, and violent language to be "rejected, altered and exposed" (n.p.). And so, despite our love of words and their potential for facilitating human dignity, we must also grapple with the violence

of words, their abuse, problematizing much of what our community of scholars, educators, and editors have held sacred about words.

The misuse and abuse of language are not new. As Orwell (1946) noted almost 80 years ago, "political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (pp. 13–14). And since at least 1619 (see Hannah-Jones, 2021), as Baldwin (Baldwin & Bondy, 1964) notes, we have lived with the lies of Western humanism. However, it seems as if *now,* in just about every social institution, workplace, commercial space, and even in everyday, ordinary social interactions, language itself has been undermined and accompanied by a violent alienation. It is not just that some people are misusing and abusing language—in an inarticulate attempt to search for the shared naming of who we are, where we are, and what we are doing—but rather an active, agentive destruction of language itself in an effort to define human life and personhood only through power relations. For example, consider how federal agencies, as documented by Swerdin (2025) of The Free Speech Project, are eliminating words. Federal agencies recently flagged hundreds of words for government employees to limit or avoid what have been deemed by the current administration as "woke" ideologies. Some documents explicitly ordered the removal of certain words from public websites or school curricula. Others cautioned people not to use certain words or flagged grant proposals that could conflict with the administration's beliefs. The flagged words seem to reflect the current administration's priorities for curbing discussions, critical thinking, or any attentiveness or awareness that engages diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and policies.

> Words and phrases included "accessible," "biased," "Black," "climate crisis," "equal opportunity," "female," "Gulf of Mexico," "immigrants," "indigenous community," "inequality," "LGBTQ," "marginalized," "Native American," "pollution," "prejudice," "privilege," "racism," "social justice," "transgender," "traumatic," "unconscious bias," and "women," among many others. On Jan, 29, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) directed government agencies to strip "gender ideology" from all websites, contracts, and emails. Agencies were ordered to end employee resource groups, terminate grants and contracts related to gender, and replace the word "gender" with "sex" on government forms. (The Free Speech Project, 2025, n.p.)

Beyond the list of banned words noted in The Free Speech Project (2025), other words such as "critical race theory," which, in what can be classified as Orwellian talk, the current administration called "indoctrination" and "racist" (CBS News, 2025), and the banning of books from P–12 schools and libraries, including books representing LGBTQIA+ lives and racial diversity and the struggle for racial equality. Iconic of such word abuse is the removal of books on racism at the Naval Academy Library, including removing Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), while leaving Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925), (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025; Ismay, 2025; see also Lowery, 2023; Pérez, 2023). While what's not been censored is also at issue, it is not just what has or has not been censored or that which we can name as having been eliminated, as pernicious,

it is also those hegemonic silences and lacunae we do not even realize that have been forced upon us (Blackburn et al., 2024; Sheriff, 2000; Sue, 2015).

Given what we as educators and scholars of the teaching and learning of literacy, literature, and the language arts, have been hit with, we must ask, *Does language matter now? How is personhood constructed in and through language?* and perhaps we also need to ask, *How can we reconstruct language?* We invite exploration of how language matters in the lives of "ordinary" people[3] from their perspectives as they move through and do life. We assert that by centering or situating ordinary people as they go about their everyday lives, we are better able to capture and see the nuances of how language matters in their lives— our lives—as well as how they—we—use language to move in powerful and agentive ways. It is through everyday life that we need to start reconstructing language, from the bottom up, especially in classrooms.

We realize there is no such thing as purely bottom-up. It is not just that everyday life is often organized by broader social, cultural, political, and linguistic structures, but it is also about how and what people see is influenced by what they know through their lived experiences. It is also informed by the intellectual frameworks that people, including we, knowingly and unknowingly adopt. In everyday life, people are continuously confronted by disjuncture, chaos, and pain caused by the gap between the intellectual frameworks they have been socialized to and forced to adopt. People reflect on those gaps and lacune. Ethnographers and other scholars committed to seeking and representing emic perspectives play a critical role in languaging those gaps and lacune. Such scholarship can create possibilities for adapting, modifying, challenging, and languaging frameworks, histories, and the language and words currently being used to define everyday life. We hold this view as particularly important in the life of classrooms. It is through language that established intellectual framings naturalize the gaps and lacunae of people's lives, but it is also through language that scholars, educators, and others make visible how powerful institutions and powerful people language ordinary people into being. This is merely to say that some ways of languaging the world are privileged and privileging while other ways of languaging are silenced.

Part of languaging concerns who is doing the languaging and who is being languaged. The *who* of our words become reflections and refractions of how we see and value one another's personhood. Personhood is the state or condition of being a person (Fowler, 2010). It is socially constructed through languaging (Bloome et al., 2022). Currently, we are living in a time when words seem to be losing their specificity and ability to help us see each other's personhood, histories, brilliance, and resilience. Increasingly, as Morrison (1993) warned, they seem to be distorting and limiting our thoughts and facilitating systemic, systematic, and structural violence, harm, and trauma that have material consequences for everyday people. Like bell hooks (2000), we view violence as not just physical acts but also as systemic, emotional, and psychological oppression.

Oppression begins with silencing. Silencing is an evolving and dynamic phenomenon that can be thought of as a hidden agenda maintained by an unequal hierarchy that contradicts evidence, ideologies, and experiences (Fine, 1987).

Additionally, the removal of certain books, words, types of research, class offerings, etc., helps facilitate silencing. Silencing is predicated on fear and preserves an ideology of equal opportunity that gives the impression of freedom and access while obscuring the unequal distribution of unequal resources within a system of asymmetrical power relations (Fine, 1991, 1995; Haviland, 2008; Power-Carter, 2001). Ultimately, silencing can be thought of as a form of erasure that perpetuates inequities. Moreover, silencing can lead to being silenced, a submission to asymmetric power relations that can leave one helpless and hopeless (Power-Carter, 2001). Being silenced occurs when the weight of words becomes so menacing, heavy, or traumatic that the only option is to succumb to the trauma. Being silenced is not a fixed phenomenon but a complex one that can be thought of as contextual and more so a reflection of internalized trauma (e.g., internalized racism), fear, and distortion. It can also be thought of as a type of survival mode. Silencing and being silenced begin to make visible how words matter and how our words shape history and historical notions of freedom as well as how everyday people use words. Particularly, silencing and being silenced also make visible how students, teachers, and administrators use words agentively to navigate, respond to, and react to various notions of personhood that are ascribed to them via ideals and conceptions of freedom by others.

In the sections that follow, we consider the juxtaposition of words and violence as a framing to ponder and make visible how words can perpetuate violence against ordinary people and to consider the implications for scholarship on the teaching and learning of literacy, literature, and the language arts. We begin by considering the First Amendment of the US Constitution, complicating notions of language and freedom and how words can embody and enact silencing, silenced, and erasure. Next, we consider how nominalization can obfuscate meaning and decenter and desensitize people to the consequences of words that facilitate certain notions of personhood. Then, we consider how violence can become concretized and normalized in schools through various policies and can ascribe certain notions of personhood. Finally, we explore the need for reconstructing language and one possibility for moving in that direction. Ultimately, in this exploration of language and violence, we ask literacy scholars to consider how the erasure of words can be terrorizing, consequential, and perpetuate violence in the lives of everyday people (see also Tuck, 2009).

On the Silencing of Free Speech

In the US, free speech is defined by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States and a series of court cases. The First Amendment states, in part, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting, the free exercise thereof; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for redress of grievances." While the premise appears to be that the government cannot restrict *the people*'s ideas and opinions and that it protects *the people*'s freedom to express those ideas and opinions, in some ways it is more so the illusion of free speech. Questions need to be asked, for example,

about whose free speech is protected. The First Amendment was ratified on December 15, 1791, but according to the 1790 census, a year prior to the ratification of this amendment there were approximately 697,624 enslaved people living in the United States. This poses quite a conundrum and raises both questions of how does language matter and whose language matters? That is, it is not just what a person says that is at issue but also who that person is and whether that person is defined as a full human being (cf., Appell-Warren, 2015). Issues of personhood persist and are complex, intersectional, and often implicate certain ideologies that seek to use a normalized "standard" to measure or judge certain groups of people's personhood through various characteristics and classifications (e.g., race, religion, immigration status, gender, class, sexual orientation). In brief, questions of free speech are intimately tied to questions of personhood and how a society, a state, or a group defines and acts on an explicitly or implicitly held definition of personhood.[4] Currently, people of color who are immigrants, including both those in the US legally and those who are undocumented, are at risk of arrest and deportation if they express views that the government finds objectionable (for example, the arrests of Mahmound Khalil, Rumeysa Ozturk, Badar Khan Suri, and Rasha Alawieh; see Rubin, 2025). In education, there have been a number of court cases that limit students' and teachers' free speech (*C. K.–W. v. Wentzville R-IV School District*, 2023; *MacRae v. Mattos*, 2024).

The normalization of silencing is playing out across American schools and classrooms—for example, suppressing and silencing students for hairstyles (Lozano, 2024) and arresting students who are peacefully protesting (Silva & Lozano, 2024). Teachers are losing their jobs because they use a student's preferred name (WFTV Channel 9, 2025); school curricula are being revised to suggest enslaved people benefited from slavery (Álvarez, 2023); and laws are being passed to ensure that the history of some marginalized communities are removed from textbooks and websites (Baldor & Copp, 2025). University departments are being disbanded and staff and faculty laid off for expressing content and views contrary to the government's (McGhee & Shaulis, 2025). Research grants are being defunded as part of a broader DEI and anti-intellectual movement (Stahl, 2025); universities are losing funding as part of an effort to further curb DEI (Burga, 2025); Department of Education workers were being placed on leave (Jones II, 2025) and are now being fired; and school boards are reinstating Confederate school names (Schultz, 2024).

When we as literacy scholars use words in ways that mask, obscure, or leave the *who* in our scholarship unclear, similar to our American founders, we run the risk of implicating ourselves and our scholarly contributions in historical cycles of violence that can lead to silencing and erasing the perspectives and experiences of everyday people, especially those who have been historically or currently marginalized across various intersections.

In his lecture entitled *Struggle for Integrity*, Baldwin (1962, 2011) states,

> Words are attempts made by us all to get to something which is real and which lives behind the words . . . . The terrible thing is that the reality behind all these words depend on choices one has got to make, forever and ever, every day.

This quotation reminds us that words matter and that when we use them, whether in conversation with others, giving lectures, articulating and translating standards, interpreting laws, writing curriculum, or researching, they can be consequential to the lived experiences of everyday people. Thus, we must be vigilant and thoughtful about the words and choices we make as we engage in research on the teaching and learning of literacy, literature, and the language arts. One way that we can be aware is by attending to nominalization, as it is one way to diminish people's voices and facilitate violence.

The Violence of Nominalization

Nominalization is the turning of a verb (or adjective) into a noun, like turning "defy" into "defiance." Verbalization is the process of turning a noun back into a verb, such as turning "compliance" back into "comply." Here, though, we are interested in nominalization as the refusal to recognize the verb-ish-ness—that is, the action, movement, or fluidity—in a noun or, in the reverse, the mandate to recognize only the noun-ish-ness in a noun and as such limit an understanding of a person, place, or thing in some singular place and time as if none of those things ever shift, change, or evolve. Plainly put, nominalization obscures people and makes it challenging to see how words matter. Nominalization not only contradicts the realities people experience of ever-present change (either in the thing or process itself or in the context of the thing or process), but it can also be violent. To illustrate how this sort of nominalization can be violent, we offer a current account from our home state of Ohio.

In November of 2024, the governor of Ohio, Michael DeWine, signed Senate Bill 104, a bill to ban transgender and nonbinary students from using bathrooms that align with their gender identities (BeMiller, 2024; Henry, 2024). It is worth noting that the bill was focused on a revision of College Credit Plus, something entirely unrelated to the aspect of the bill impacting transgender students, which was added at the "eleventh hour" just "before the lawmakers went on an extended break" (Henry, 2024, n.p.). With this law, Ohio joined Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, Florida, and Utah in restricting transgender students' access to "public facilities consistent with gender identity," a restriction which the American Medical Association opposes (Henry, 2024, n.p.). North Carolina was the first with such a law, but it has since been appealed. Idaho's law has been blocked, and Florida, Oklahoma, and Tennessee's laws are being contested (Henry, 2024). As of the writing of this essay, the ACLU is considering whether to take action against Ohio's bill (BeMiller, 2024).

In February of 2025, the Columbus City Schools (CCS) Board of Education debated whether to comply with the law. It ultimately decided to adhere to the law by rescinding its policy regarding transgender students (Behrens, 2025). Although the law specifies multi-occupancy lavatories, locker rooms, and overnight accommodations in public and private K–12 schools and colleges, the CCS interpretation of the law was broader reaching. The policy CCS rescinded in an attempt to follow the law guided district employees to protect the privacy of students, specifically

concerning the names and pronouns of transgender students. It included "information about how students and families could change the name and gender of a student in the district systems" (Behrens, 2025, n.p.). Rescinding this policy provoked an undoing of not only policies pertaining to bathrooms and such but also to district records. Practically speaking, this information publicly played out with the undoing of name and gender changes in the district's system, including those changes made by students' parents (Behrens, 2025). Further, the board sent a letter to all parents and guardians informing them that they would be prohibited from making such changes; the most they could do is list a "'nickname' for their student if they so choose" (Behrens, 2025, n.p.). In other words, by rescinding the policy in order to adhere to the state law, the board did much more damage to transgender students than the state required (and more than any other school district in the state) (Behrens, 2025). As a result, parents and students expressed concerns that they now feel school is less safe, and the LGBTQIA+ community is more vulnerable to harassment.

Another question raised was whether teachers in the district can use students' names and pronouns in class. Dara Adkison of TransOhio said the law does not restrict the use of students' names and pronouns, but when the question was posed to the district, they offered no reply (Behrens, 2025). The state of Florida has more recently responded to such a question: In April 2025, the contract of a teacher in Florida was not renewed because she called a student by their chosen name without obtaining parental permission.

What is at issue is the noun, *gender*. According to the World Health Organization, "gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed . . . . As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time" (World Health Organization, 2025). Thus, while gender is a noun, it can also be thought of as a collection of nouns with characteristics that can vary and change. Moreover, gender is a complex construct that has often been interpreted in ways that preserve certain notions of personhood based on normalized characteristics of what it means to be a person and particular characteristics a person must have to be considered a person or a "normal" person. An awareness of nominalization begins to make visible the way words hold meaning(s) and situate people in various contexts and that people use words as they relationally interact with and to one another and form human relationships. Buber's (1923) philosophy argued that *I-It* relationships are transactional and treat human relationships and people as things, and *I-Thou* relationships view human relationships as dialogical and see everyone as unique and in relation to and in relationship with others. The nominalization of being and living, and the relationships inherent in being and living, turns everyone into an "it."

The CCS example makes visible how nominalization can lead to *I-It* relationships and treating people like objects, silencing their voices, and devaluing their experiences through the process of othering. In the above example of nominalization, silencing is not only occurring by restricting transgender students' access to public facilities but also through naming. Feminists have long recognized the power of naming as a means to shape notions of personhood, challenge established

norms, and critique forms of oppression (Elshtain, 1982; Lorde, 1982; Weedon, 1987; Zimmerman, 1993). Consider the memory and history of the United States to understand how naming can also be utilized as a tool to assimilate, devalue, and dehumanize a person. Enslaved Africans[5] who were considered objects were often stripped of their names and given new ones that aligned more with their enslavers. Similarly, Indigenous Americans were labeled savages, persons with disabilities as retarded, and undocumented immigrants are still today often referred to as illegal aliens. Literacy scholars must be cautious not to fall into an *I-It* paradigm with the words we use in our scholarship and teaching because the word choices that we make can be consequential to everyday people.

The violence of silencing is consequential and can inform students' perceptions and experiences about school. According to Lacoe (2020), students who felt unsafe in classrooms had lower scores on English and math standardized tests, and 80 percent of students who felt unsafe in classrooms also felt unsafe in hallways, bathrooms, and locker rooms (p. 1). The World Health Organization states, "Rigid gender norms . . . negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination as a result . . . . They are at higher risk of . . . mental health problems, including suicide" (World Health Organization, 2025). According to the Trevor Project (2024), "transgender and nonbinary young people face an elevated risk for depression, thoughts of suicide, and attempting suicide compared to those who are cisgender." Data show that suicide attempts increased by as much as 72 percent among students ages 13–17 in states enacting anti-transgender laws.

That these mental health challenges are tied to the enactment of these transphobic laws and policies in schools was found in the most recent school climate survey of LGBTQIA+ students in US schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). The Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that "LGBTQ students who experience higher levels of victimization based on their gender expression . . . had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression" (p. 45). In other words, the nominalization of gender in schools makes transgender students feel bad about themselves and their schools, which they are required to attend. These terrible feelings are so intense that some of these students experience depression and consider and attempt suicide (Trevor Project, 2024). Thus, they make the violence of nominalization undeniable.

The above discussion of nominalization provides one example in the recent context of how words can be used in ways that perpetuate violence and trauma in today's classrooms and schools. Equally important, nominalization can lead to suppressing and silencing marginalized voices and those who support and/or advocate for them. Ultimately, nominalization can produce a hostile context that hinders literacy learning. The following section further explores violence, words, and how words matter within policies.

On the Violence of the Language of P–12 and Policies

Given the threat of losing much-needed federal funding, most public P–12 schools have been in lockstep with government policies and practices. One example of

escape from such control has been laid out in the private sector. Private schools operate in ways that attend to the needs of select groups of people. For example, many private schools were developed in conjunction with religious denominations, allowing the ideals and principles of the religion to be readily discussed and incorporated into the curriculum. Some private schools were established to help "protect" certain ideals and values related to diversity. For example, during the *white flight* that occurred after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision struck down the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) separate but equal doctrine, many private schools were established for middle-class white families who were against the idea of integration of classroom spaces (Bell, 2005). In both examples, the language of separation and differentiation was weaponized in covert and overt ways to justify the practice of separate but equal.

While the disruption of narratives and discourses that naturalize violence as a means to legitimize positions and outcomes, as noted earlier, is not new to the field of education (e.g., backlash to California's Proposition 227 (1998)), what is new is the unique ways that language in the form of words is being weaponized through the enactment of anti-DEI policies that seek to ban books, restrict controversial topics in the curriculum, and silence diverse voices in classrooms. It is not a one-off but a cadre of policies that views language diversity as detrimental to the fabric of education. These actions have effectively weaponized language in ways that normalize linguistic violence at the hands of educators and policymakers. Book bans saw an extreme uptick in 2020 according to a report from NPR and other organizations. According to an NPR report, many of the bans were initiated by groups in the state of Florida. These groups did not remain isolated to the state of Florida but instead expanded into other states around the country. Bans on books named certain texts as "pornographic," "obscene," "sexualized," or highly "racialized" (Blair, 2024; Webb, 2025). By languaging the texts as morally wrong and harmful to children, the groups enact linguistic violence toward the authors and publishing companies tasked with creating children's literature. In turn, the language results in policies that further restrict and punish teachers and districts who keep such books on their shelves.

Controversial topics in classrooms have also seen increased policing of language. A 2022 NPR report found that 137 bills were introduced across five states that would restrict and ban controversial topics in schools. For example, topics that include discussions of race, American history, and politics were among some of the highlighted restrictions in their report (Limbong, 2022). In Iowa, a social studies teacher created a list of words that could not be spoken in her seventh-grade class. Words such as Holocaust, Ohio, and Bark were amongst the list of words that were punishable in the classroom (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2024). These words are being purged from institutional discourse as political backlash against DEI. Opponents of DEI argue that certain groups, particularly people from historically marginalized groups, received preferential treatment (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants of color). The underbelly of this sentiment has emboldened groups that believe in the inherent value, intellectual superiority, and dominance of people of European descent who have white skin

while simultaneously espousing weakness and ignorance regarding those who do not possess such characteristics.

Restricting words that speak to the experiences of those who have been marginalized moves beyond and *I-It* and *I-Thou* to an *I-nothing* paradigm. Erasure is violence because erasing words can erase people and communities (e.g., Kimmerer, 2013), especially when the erased words are those people use to describe and share their everyday experiences. The words that we use as scholars in our research and teaching have the potential to create spaces in which the experiences of people who have been marginalized can be shared and made visible or alternatively deepen the erasure of those experiences and those marginalized communities. As scholars and teachers, we need to ask: How can we represent the experiences of marginalized people and communities if the words that capture those experiences and communities are banned? Government policies banning words such as those we have been discussing have implications for not only how and what teachers can teach and how and what students can learn in literacy classrooms but constitute symbolic violence, erasure of people and communities, and the potential of scholars and researchers to fully capture the personhood of the people and communities represented in our scholarship. How do words matter? For whom? These are questions we must continue to ponder as we engage in our work.

Deconstruction without Reconstruction of Language in Education

We have discussed some of the challenges with our current political and educational contexts, particularly the importance of language and how words can lead to silencing and devaluing personhood and, ultimately, to violence. One way some literacy scholars are trying to navigate the current context is to hone their practices and skills for listening to data that contribute to understanding how *the* world in relation to *our* worlds comes to be in and through language in ways not always obvious to ourselves or others (Taylor & Hikida, 2023). We must develop and practice an analytic focus on, a listening for, moments of humanizing and emancipatory agency, one understood as the joint accomplishment of social action (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). We view such a perspective as one initial step in a reconstructive stance toward literacy research.

A reconstructive stance centers everyday people and foregrounds how they interact with one another within and across time. A reconstructive stance also centers how people use emancipatory moments, movements, and steps toward liberatory learning and practice (e.g., Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984; Love, 2019; Pitts, 2023; Richardson, 2018) to support and honor the heterogeneity of one another's personhood and cultivate just and inclusive educational spaces within contexts often politically pressurized to practice erasure.

Given the political context, there is an urgency to understand better how, as Morrison (1993) notes, our words can facilitate violence toward others. Words like "deconstructive" or "critical" must be revisited in relation to "who" and even our own proximity as educational researchers to the "who" of work and the communities with whom we collaborate as literacy scholars. Thus, it is vital to listen

for how language, literacy, and text are being used in policy and practice, particularly the ways words can normalize and reify violence. By vital, we mean life giving, necessary for ensuring that the lived experiences of many vulnerable and marginalized people in schools, within our country, and across the world are not erased or silenced. Literacy scholars must be careful not to use texts, either written or spoken, in ways that propagate violence against others, regardless of intention.

We are not naïve about what we propose, and we understand that the challenge to us as literacy scholars to have a deeper, beyond-the-surface understanding and awareness of contexts (e.g., historical, cultural, macro, micro) must not be thought of in simplistic ways, as doing so can lead to pervasive silencing, hiding, or obscuring the contributions, perspectives, and experiences of everyday people and communities. Such a challenge needs to be understood as an opportunity to expand our knowledge rather than limit it and involves exploring other perspectives and seeing differently. We must also challenge ourselves to "link" in different theories, philosophies, and conceptual framings (Bloome et al., 2022), and "look again" in ways that recenter the personhood of everyday people to better capture the unique ways that they navigate the world around individuals and the challenges before them. We require a type of "seeing" that also makes visible the tenacity, strength, agency, and ultimately the contributions of everyday people, especially how they persist. Even amidst great injustices and trumpery, everyday people use words in agentive ways that build networks and unite them across various identity intersections to support one another when political agendas try to erase their personhood and experiences.

Today, as piercing whispers, tumultuous cries, and turbulent shrills surround our research and teaching and make listening challenging, we assert as Angelou (2004) encouraged, that as literacy scholars we must continue our work and learn to listen. The following section further explicates how literacy researchers can listen well.

How to Listen Well

Schultz (2003) defines listening as how one "attends to individuals, the classroom as a group, the broader social context, and, cutting across all of these, to silence and acts of silencing" (p. 6). She invites teachers, but we believe researchers can also take up this listening stance by beginning with a people-centered lens that values complexity and nuance. While it may seem self-evident that researchers should start with observations and questions rather than answers, we are suggesting that both our observations and questions come from frames that we bring with us. At issue is how we get beyond the explicit and implicit frames we hold. So, while it may be tempting to focus on the research question, the kind of listening we are suggesting requires researchers to center people and hold lightly what they believe their research questions to be, allowing them to change or emerge as researchers come to know the people with whom they learn.

Davies (2011) calls this emergent listening and defines it like this: "Emergent listening is not a simple extension of usual practices of listening. It involves work-

ing, to some extent, against oneself, and against those habitual practices through which one establishes 'this is who I am'" (p. 21). That is, researchers often hold beliefs about what it means to do research, what it means to be a researcher, and comfortable and habitual ways of acting to be a researcher. This often comes with presuppositions about what counts as knowledge, text, reading, and writing. However, Schultz (2003) and Davies (2011) invite a listening stance that requires researchers to first work to excavate their presuppositions about what they believe is happening and then to work against that so that they can listen for how the people they learn from and with are making sense of the world.

One way to enact this kind of listening in literacy research is through *post hoc* analysis, or analysis that examines "how interlocutors interactionally define the function of a message" (Bloome et al., 2022, p. 145). In other words, this kind of analysis tends not to be about a message's intention or presupposition but about its consequence, which we argue allows researchers to work to decenter themselves in favor of listening to the people from whom they aim to learn. Attending to situatedness is important when undertaking post hoc analysis in literacy research. It asks us to consider complexity and the multiple levels of meaning that people bring to a context. A post hoc analysis focuses more so on unpacking what words being used mean now and not necessarily what they meant before. For example, consider the term DEI. To this point in history, DEI has arguably been understood to signify a movement to redress systemic and institutional injustice that has disenfranchised groups of people, including by race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality, among other identity markers. It was born from groundbreaking legislation in the 1960s such as the Equal Pay Act (1963), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967). However, more recently, DEI has been viewed as an approach that exacerbates racial hostility and as wasteful and discriminatory (Alfonseca, 2024). In a recent presidential executive order, DEI was characterized as a "forced illegal and immoral discrimination programs . . . into virtually all aspects of the Federal Government, in areas ranging from airline safety to the military" (Exec. Order No. 14151, 2025). The dismantling of DEI has facilitated tensions and vigorous discourse across many disciplines and topics that can be captured in research manuscripts and lectures, newspaper and magazine articles, literary works, and social media posts, as well as music.

When considering current notions of DEI, what is often obscured is how our discourse, language, and words can be oppressive and to whom they are oppressive. As scholars, it is imperative, especially in our current educational contexts, that we listen well and utilize conceptual and theoretical frameworks (e.g., borderlands; conscientização; care; critical race theory; endarkened feminism; intersectionality; and ubuntu) and engage in practices (e.g., positionality statements; linking; listening; intellectual meditations) that build logics of inquiry that center and value the personhood of everyday people in the schools and communities with whom we collaborate and research. Doing so helps ensure that we do not unknowingly participate in violence or create cycles of violence through our scholarship that can be weaponized against the very people we seek to learn from.

Final Comments

Morrison (1994), along with other scholars, has given us a glimpse of the violence of language when its use for subjugation and power is disregarded in school and classroom practices and curricula (e.g., Blackburn, 2022; Fine, 1987; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019; Muhummad, 2020; Woodson, 1933). Morrison articulates how words can negatively construct Black children in the classroom. She warns us that

> Language must not sweat but must be careful and appear effortless . . . It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own Language. And then be told things about his Language which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. (p. 124)

Morrison reminds us that we should not be careless with our words and that words are not neutral but rather like little cells that build and comport meaning, connecting us to the people, institutions, and things that matter in our lives. Words help articulate the social worlds in which we play, learn, and evolve; they can also reflect and refract the ideologies and belief systems that guide, sustain, as well as pressurize and terrorize us. We are our languaging, and our languaging is us. We suggest that we not only build with and through language, but

> evolve a language . . . in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. And, if [they] cannot articulate it, [they] are submerged. If [they] do not have the tools required to articulate our circumstances, [they] are submerged by the forces of our societies. (Baldwin, 1997, p. 5)

In our current context, where censorship abounds and we have moved from banned book lists to banned word lists, it is important that we are modeling and preparing current and future generations of learners and scholars to be aware of how words can perpetuate and implicate these scholars in cycles of violence and that our words build relational connections that implicate us within various ideologies and institutions.

The reconstruction of language we are proposing will not be an easy or quick endeavor, but the press of time is upon us. In his "Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis," James Baldwin (2016) writes, "For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night" (p. 23). Yesterday, they began taking away the words of Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Judy Blume, Stephen Chbosky, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Anne Frank, William Golding, George Orwell, Todd Parr, Art Spiegelman, Alice Walker, E. B. White, and Elie Wiesel, among others. All of these people are considered thinkers, writers, and storytellers who used words to articulate the complexity of personhood, and they invite students in classrooms across time and a variety of teaching and learning contexts to think more broadly about one another's experiences and the worlds around us. Yes, night is coming quickly, but we must continue to listen well. Even in darkness, hope still resides in the wonderment and power of words.

NOTES

1. This is a translation by Ursula Le Guin (2006) of Socrates from the *Phaedo*, 115e, "εὖ γὰρ ἴσθι, ἦ δ' ὅς, ὦ ἄριστε Κρίτων, τὸ μὴ καλῶς λέγειν οὐ μόνον εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο πλημμελές, ἀλλὰ καὶ κακόν τι ἐμποιεῖ ταῖς ψυχαῖς". This phrase has been translated in multiple ways; see Anadale (2010) for a discussion of the different ways it has been translated and subsequent different interpretations.
2. We are using the phrase "a love supreme" as referencing a universal human experience of spirituality and transcendence and not any particular religious orientation—which is how we interpret this particular album from John Coltrane.
3. We are using the phrase "ordinary people" as used in Sheridan et al. (2000). Based on the responses received by the Mass-Observation Project, Sheridan et al. (2000) distinguish "ordinary people" from those whose social and economic positions in society provide them taken-for-granted access to having their writing read and their voices heard and matter. "Ordinary people" have no such access.
4. By personhood, we mean a shared ideology of what counts as a person, what kinds of people are conceptualized, and what characteristics, traits, rights, and obligations are assumed to be inherent to which kinds of people (see Appell-Warren, 2014).
5. The term "enslaved African" is itself an example of the violence of naming. As Brown (2019) states, various names have been used as "*instruments* of racial enslavement within the USA—past and present" (original emphasis, p. 163).

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