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## “You gotta believe in something, something, something”: Evoking literacy lives as *nostalgia for the future*

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“You Gotta Believe in Something, Something, Something”: Evoking Literacy Lives as *Nostalgia*  
*for the Future*

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### Abstract

We render in this theoretical inquiry, informed by empirical data, understandings of how preservice teachers' literacy lives come into curricular considerations of future teaching and learning in the secondary English classroom. In doing this work, we wondered about the past, present, and future lives of teachers: how might we understand the teaching of English as profoundly *nostalgic* work? Building upon what Miller (2010) conceptualized as “nostalgia for the future” (p. 7), and drawing across curriculum theory, literacy research, teaching and teacher education research, and the music of Frank Ocean, we attend to dangerous nostalgia in the current political moment, while also finding *nostalgia for the future* useful for ways a “politicization of memory [...] can illuminate and transform the present” towards more just futures (hooks, 1990, p. 121-122). We assert this nostalgia for the future, one necessarily prospective and not solely retrospective, as informed by written reflections authored by preservice teachers and teacher educators, and reflections of teaching activities in undergraduate and internship-year teacher-preparation courses. Ultimately we argue the concept affords a frame for making sense of the past while also orienting preservice teachers forward, building on that past critically for the work of imagining and constructing more just worlds for their future students.

“You Gotta Believe in Something, Something, Something”: Evoking Literacy Lives as *Nostalgia*  
*for the Future*

So we'll speak of the past / in the future perfect tense / of places we will go.

--The War on Drugs, “Buenos Aires Beach”

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes.

--Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

We came to this inquiry wondering about the past, present and future literacy lives of teachers: how might we understand the teaching of secondary English as profoundly *nostalgic* work? This, we feel, is a crucial question in the contemporary moment, in which rampant testing, accountability reform, and the reduction of teacher autonomy negate the humanizing moments at the center of inherently complex and messy interactions between students and teachers (Nieto, 2005; Phillip, Souto-Manning, Anderson, Horn, Carter Andrews, Still & Varghese, 2018). What's more, we're well-aware that in the current political context there is a rhetorical weaponizing of nostalgia, a nostalgia for a thing that never was (Jameson, 1991), deployed to racist, xenophobic, and sexist ends in a bid to return the U.S. to past “greatness” (Weems, 2016). Here we provoke complex stances in opposition to that agenda. In rendering multiple meanings of teaching and learning envisioned across preservice teachers' literacy lives, we build upon what Miller (2010) conceptualized as “nostalgia for the future” (p. 7). We find this frame useful for the ways a “politicization of memory [...] can illuminate and transform the present” towards more just futures (hooks, 1990, as cited by St. Pierre, 2008, pp. 121-122). In particular, we assert

this nostalgia for the future as necessarily “prospective as well as retrospective” (Miller, 2010, p. 10). We acknowledge further a complex tension with which we have struggled from the start, and continue to call into question: that past-dwelling, especially on things we love, can be overly, dangerously, nostalgic. Therefore, it is in complicating a singular notion of what nostalgia may be, and lensing through the interplay of complex identities and literacy experiences, that we imagine forward more humane ways of teaching and learning.

We explore this interplay by analyzing literacy lives of preservice teachers in written reflections they authored in an English methods course.<sup>1</sup> We examine how the literacy practices teachers enact, and the texts that move them, come into curricular considerations of envisioning future teaching in secondary English classrooms. We purposefully point to affordances and dangers as possibilities for imagining more equitable and humane, inclusive, pluralistic and just futures for English teachers and youth with whom they teach and learn -- a distilling and extending of the intricate ways nostalgia for the future may be contextualized in and as the work of secondary English research, teaching and teacher education.

### **Theoretically Framing the Inquiry**

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<sup>1</sup> As context for the inquiry, Vaughn asked preservice teachers to write a “two-to-three page” response to the prompt: “Where do you see yourself across the paradigms of teaching English? What paradigms resonate with you, and which do not? What might you choose to foreground and background in your own curricular and instructional choices?” Vaughn and instructors sought for preservice teachers to consider the interplay of paradigms of secondary English, systemic inequities in teaching, and their own literacy lives at a time when white, middle-class women comprise the prevalent demographic in US schools (Phillip et al., 2018). Such work unfolded as particularly important, as of the 45 total students enrolled in the course in fall 2015 and fall 2016, three identified as preservice teachers of color.

The year following the methods course, students enrolled in a once-weekly seminar to accompany their year-long teaching internship. The seminar emphasized candidates designing teaching practices in conversation with their own experiences as former students. As a supplement to primary coursework, Scott and Alecia developed lesson materials (Kleon, 2010; Nye, 1998; Phillips, 2012) for a 75-minute workshop during the seminar on the interplay of teaching found poetry with texts from students’ literacy lives.

To analyze literacy lives of preservice teachers, we theorize meanings of nostalgia for the future drawn across productive spaces of curriculum theory (Miller, 2010; St. Pierre, 2008), literacy research (Kirkland, 2013), and teaching and teacher education research in considering literacy lives of teachers of English (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Drury, 2012). Saldívar-Hull (2000) compels researchers to “look in nontraditional places for our theories” (p. 46); we thus further build with the music and popularized narratives of musicians Chance the Rapper, Kendrick Lamar, and notably, R&B singer Frank Ocean (2011), whose mixtape *nostalgia, ULTRA*.<sup>2</sup> offers one rendering of what it means for an individual to make sense of the past as a way of (re)envisioning the future.

### **Envisioning a Nostalgia for the Future**

Miller (2010), in historicizing curriculum theory, points to a predominant definition of nostalgia as “wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to some past period or irrecoverable condition” (p. 13). We are wary of ways such nostalgia idealizes and thus inhibits teachers’ ability to be critical of their teaching. In seeking to humanize the work of teaching as occurring at intersections of lives lived and literacies practiced for teachers and students, we theorize nostalgia for the future as teaching English in ways that “illuminate and transform” (hooks, 1990, as cited by St. Pierre, 2008, pp. 121-122) how pasts fold into literate spaces in which we researchers, teachers, and students live, learn and teach, examining what literacy lives look like as working toward justice (Watson & Beymer, 2019).

In deliberately naming the very real dangers of nostalgia, we engage prior scholarship that has well-established the powerful and problematic hold of the past on secondary English curriculum and teaching. For example, ongoing critical work (e.g., Applebee, 1997; Macaluso &

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<sup>2</sup> We use Frank Ocean’s preferred spelling of the mixtape, punctuation included.

Macaluso, 2018) has sought to critique the continued dominance of a historically privileged canon of secondary English texts -- a clearly and troublingly nostalgic machine -- in perpetuating white, male, colonial legacies about what and who does and does not count as suitable text for English teaching. More broadly, nostalgia in the context of this inquiry evokes another formidable line of critique: the tendency to idealize, inhibiting the ability to see racialized, xenophobic, and sexist intentions and consequences clearly and critically. Miller additionally notes the problem of “armchair nostalgia” (Appadurai, 1996), or a nostalgia for a past without any actual lived experience of it (consider, for example, policymakers who, having never taught, romanticize the profession of teaching). Further still is the problem of what Jameson (1991) calls “nostalgia for the present,” or a nostalgia for things that never were, that nevertheless still comes to distort conceptions of the present and our work as teachers and learners within it. There is also, as St. Pierre (2008) notes in her study of spatializations of nostalgia embodied in notions of “home,” a possibility of overdetermining relationships between our pasts and ourselves:

Attachment is risky, for identity always gets away from us, it fractures, we lose it, and we don't know who we are, even at home. The point here about attachment to places, and our histories in them, is that home is not a haven; identity can never be a refuge. A consolation derived from an authentic, stable essence is no more possible in places than in subjectivities. (p. 120)

Given these dangers of nostalgia and attachment, we are wary and critical of the ways nostalgia has and continues to shape literacy teaching practice. We thus grapple with these tensions as we consider the role nostalgia for the future plays in English teaching and learning.

In envisioning nostalgia for the future of secondary English teaching, we build upon both Miller and St. Pierre's envisioning of a doubled sense of nostalgia that articulates the future,

similar to Deleuze's (1993) assertion, in an analysis of the ways Baroque style anticipated contemporary aesthetics, that we hold "memor[ies] of the future" (p. 107). We are interested in ways preservice teachers imagine future practice as evoking meanings of nostalgia, which we understand as problematic yet also resonant. We are further interested in how teachers build upon past literacy experiences in their lives, how moments of engagement emerge as points of enactment in future practices. Accordingly, we move toward recognitions that teachers work within iterative processes, honing practices from a multitude of exterior and interior forces. As St. Pierre (2008) noted: "This story never begins but has always been, and I slip into it over and over again in different places, and it is as if I too have always been there" (p. 123). We thus imagine nostalgia for the future as rendered in our inquiry through written reflections authored by preservice teachers.

We extend these critical theories, and imagine with the contemplative R&B of Frank Ocean, who gave away for free on the social networking site Tumblr the 14 songs comprising his first mixtape, titled *nostalgia, ULTRA*. Ocean's rendering of nostalgia makes explicit the ways he works through his childhood past in envisioning his future as a recording artist. The cover art for *nostalgia, ULTRA*. features "a bright orange 1980s BMW (Ocean's 'dream car') hidden in plain sight amidst lush greenery" (Dombal, 2011), underscoring a "surreality surrounding *nostalgia, ULTRA*. that makes it unique" (para. 3). Dombal's review continued:

The record is held together by tiny interludes named after 1990s video games in which the unmistakable sounds of a cassette player rewinding, fast-forwarding, and stopping are heard. The old-school touch lends *nostalgia, ULTRA*. the feel of a personal, friend-to-friend mixtape. (para. 4)



In the context of Ocean's words and music, nostalgia for the future unfolds as a building with and upon Ocean's lived experiences. Where, in reflecting on growing up without his father's presence, and explaining that loss to friends who "didn't have no fathers neither," Ocean sings, in "There Will be Tears": "My friend said it wasn't so bad / You can't miss what you ain't had / Well, I can -- I'm sad" (para. 6). Ocean ushers forward what Deleuze (1993) reminds may be thought of as memories of the future, moments remembered that never happened. Or, as St. Pierre (2008) notes, in "remembering" her parents' deaths even as they had not yet happened: having memories for what one never had, or will have.

The beat that lingers alongside "There Will Be Tears" underscores these meanings of nostalgia for the future as also moving forward; the fast-forwarding and rewinding of a cassette tape until Ocean arrives at a present moment comprised of memories of his past. In this, we are reminded of Krapp, protagonist of Samuel Beckett's 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958/2006), alone in the familiar confines of a room that may be his basement den. Krapp interrogates his past by rewinding and fast forwarding through decades of tape-recorded journals, listening and going back to recordings of things he said on different days. Across the space of the one-act play that opens on a "late evening in the future," Krapp reflects on what may be next, which we find interesting; the play culminates with Krapp asking if he would go back, resolving he would not, and asserting the need to move forward into the future: "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now" (p. 223). We consider how this making of time as nonlinear may be really what nostalgia is: (your) past and (your) future as a making and remaking of time hazy, pressed into feelings, and theorizing such as this the performance of that. "You must believe in something, something, something," Ocean sings on "We All Try": "You gotta believe in something."

As Dombal (2011) described, Ocean seeks urgently to “add fine particulars that make his songs *his songs*” (original emphasis, para. 5), contextualizing in and as memory the intricate, delicate pieces, the idiosyncrasies that make meaning of one’s nostalgia, the something it becomes. Ocean composes *nostalgia, ULTRA*. from what Sudduth (2011) noted as “a collection of sounds that he finds emotionally meaningful” (para. 1) -- allusions to “Street Fighter,” “Goldeneye,” and “Soulcalibur” video games first sold for the Sony PlayStation in the late 80s and mid 90s; a Nicole Kidman monologue culled from Stanley Kubrick’s 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut*. As Ocean told a reporter, of the mixtape’s naming, “It’s nostalgic. It’s a longing for the past. That’s what this record felt like” (Baker, 2011, para. 7). Or, as Ocean told an interviewer, “sometimes I prefer my childhood over all this serious adulthood shit. [...]” (Watson, 2017, para. 1). As Watson (2017) noted, “Nostalgia isn’t just an aesthetic choice for Ocean but a reminder of his innocence, youth, and moments that have become distant memories with age. The longing is celebrated and shared” (para. 1). Ocean’s nostalgia, then, turns toward the creativity of childhood (Nye, 1998) as possibilities for making art for the future.

In this way, Ocean, interpolating Coldplay’s “Strawberry Swing”, unfolds lyrics and instrumentation as felt experiences one atop the next:

When we were kids, we handpainted strawberries on a swing

Every moment was so precious, then

I’m still kicking, I’m daydreaming on a strawberry swing

The entire Earth is fighting, all the world is at its end

Just in case, an atom bomb, comes falling on my lawn

I should say and you should hear, I’ve loved

I’ve loved the good times here, I’ve loved our good times here.

Christgau (2018) noted that Ocean, even in performing a cover of Coldplay's already-known song, maintains "its lyricism or, as promised, its nostalgia" (para. 1). Ocean in "Strawberry Swing" constructs nostalgia as gesturing across future and past -- "every moment was so precious" (line 2) -- intimately asserted in particularities of the present: "then / I'm still kicking, I'm daydreaming on a strawberry swing" (line 3). In this saying "farewell to the places you know" (line 8), Ocean posits nostalgia for the future as complicating the question of what may be known, but also what "you should know, you should hear." (line 11).

In our inquiry, examining preservice teachers' making meaning of their literacy lives in written reflections, we seek to assert this nostalgia as not benign in this time of racial and linguistic violence (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). As Ocean cautions, "The entire Earth is fighting." Or as his contemporary Chance the Rapper recalls in "Summer Friends", naming and complicating particularities of childhood life as he raps of South Side Chicago summertimes: "socks on concrete / Jolly Rancher kids [...] We were still catchin' lightnin' bugs / when the plague hit the backyard / had to come in at dark." Chance themes his 2016 album, *Coloring Book*, around the promise of the rapper's childhood imagination: a rendering of an imagined, future Chicago for his daughter. Cover art features a smiling Chance looking down at the newborn Kensli, just out of the frame (Darville, 2016). In this wondering we understand Chance, and Ocean, as engaging their literacy lives in and through renderings of pasts, yet then also within the present and future. This rendering of nostalgia for the future not solely as making knowledge but also as reminding us of ways we make something meaningful, a getting closer to what Ocean is trying to say; nostalgia for the future can be understood then as moments of revision. Ocean sings in "Strawberry Swing," "I've loved / I've loved the good times here, / I've

loved our good times here.” Re-rendering as *nostalgia, ULTRA.*: a making of who we are within the revision.

### **Nostalgia for the Future & Literacy Lives**

On the last Wednesday in May 2018, just after accepting the Pulitzer Prize in Music at Columbia University’s School of Journalism, rapper Kendrick Lamar, the first recipient who was not a jazz or classical musician, looked back on the ways literacy unfolds within the context of ongoing life, just as life unfolds within one’s everyday literacy practice. As Lamar told a reporter after accepting the award, “Been writing my whole life, so to get this recognition, it’s beautiful” (Baranauckas, 2018). In rendering meanings of literacy lives we consider how preservice teachers might similarly consider past lived experience as bringing forth once and future literacy practices in envisioning their work as English teachers. Nostalgia for the future conveys a shifting in what we deem important and meaningful, and the ways texts come to matter across time and space in teachers’ lives.

We thus situate this inquiry in education scholarship in drawing across conceptions of literacy lives in literacy research (Kirkland, 2013) and teaching and teacher education (Cremin et al., 2012; Meyer 1996). We contextualize nostalgia for the future as humanizing the work of English teaching, connecting past and present experiences of preservice teachers to their future lives as educators, as well as those of their students.

Kirkland (2013), examining literacy practices of young Black men, renders “share[d] snippets of their stories to provide a rich and relevant context for understanding the evolutions of texts in their lives -- how such texts connect to and extend from their everyday experiences” (p. 4). For example, Kirkland articulates his understanding of literacy lives, as a process of

unearthing a human story that fits inside the corpus of history and the core of the human self -- a story that writes itself into our words then, beneath the surface of forms and in the shades of human practice [..., in] literacy lives, fashioned through interaction between mind and society, across space and time, in such a way that culture, gender, social class, and social struggle interact only to resolve in meaningful content and lucid clarity, demarcating very subtle distinctions between identities, languages, cultures and communities. (p. 10)

We extend this understanding in how we conceptualize literacy lives, drawing on experiences of learning with texts in secondary English classrooms in which preservice teachers once were students and will soon take on roles as teachers.

Cremin and colleagues (2012), in a year-long inquiry of teachers who investigated literacy practices of youth in schools, sought to explore “whether and in what ways the teachers, positioned as researchers, developed new understandings which challenged their assumptions about children and families, and [...] [considered how] learners’ literacy lives had consequences with regard to the curriculum and/or home–school relations” (p. 104). We build on understandings of how preservice teachers may attend meaningfully to their own and student’s literacy lives. That is, in our work as teacher educators, we seek to prepare preservice teachers in envisioning teaching and teacher education as attending to the possibilities of lived experiences, knowledge, and identities of youth and communities (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Examining meanings of preservice teachers’ literacy lives emphasizes how teachers’ encounters with texts provide ways to broaden curriculum design and teaching practices that are considerate of youth’s multifaceted literacy lives.

Meyer (1996) examined preservice and “practicing teachers [understandings of] themselves as curious and literate beings, making connections with colleagues, and researching their own literacy and the literacy lives of their students” (p. xi). Similarly we understand literacy lives as not just about preservice teachers bringing texts to the curriculum that they love, but about being curious as to the texts youth engage outside of school. Attending to literacy lives considers what happens within and beyond classroom spaces as the work of literacy and the intersection of such interests and experiences (Jarvie, 2019). Meyer pointedly observed that “the telling of the stories of our lived experiences as teachers helps make us better teachers, keeps us alive as learners, and helps us understand what is unfolding before our eyes in our classrooms” (p. xi). For example, Meyer writes of an undergraduate preservice teacher, Melissa, who, authoring her story, “has come to view a literacy life as pliable, but not something that will change dramatically at once. It is something that can change, and that change is something she experienced herself” (p. 13). We consider how asking preservice teachers’ to engage their own literacy lives evokes such new meanings of curricular and pedagogical practices. In doing so we offer forward a conceptualization of literacy lives, analyzing what preservice teachers may mean by nostalgia for the future evoked through their ongoing literacy lives as beginning English teachers.

### **Methodological Approach**

Given framings of nostalgia in our inquiry, we contextualize the physical space where we met and did much of the work of data analysis, interpretation, and writing as itself undeniably nostalgic.

### **Contextualizing the Inquiry**

The threads of Miller, St. Pierre, Ocean, Chance, and Kirkland became woven together in the place where we met to write not far from our university campus -- Capitol City Brewing, which was itself an imagined version of the past, marketed by its owners as iconically entwined with the history of the city and an idealized turn-of-the-century heyday. We linger here to acknowledge that we worked, wrote, and discussed in this place shot through with nostalgia, where massive photographs from days past cover entire walls -- men leaning against the bar, beers in hand. The nascent auto industry providing citizens well-paying jobs and a tax base for city services, in return this brewery was the one, as a prominent banner over the bar recalls, that “supplied craft beer to artisans, laborers and tradesmen that built this city over a century ago.” The original place, according to promotional materials, “opened a year after Ransom E. Olds’ historic automobile ride down a city street in 1897” (Capital City Brewing, 2018, para. 1). The year before, Ransom Olds had launched the Olds Motor Vehicle Company to manufacture a gas-powered car (R. E. Olds Foundation, 2020, para. 1). Moving operations in 1899 from Capital City to Detroit, the Olds Motor Vehicle Co. becoming Oldsmobile, Ransom Olds grew “dismayed” with the turn toward high-end car manufacturing, and instead returned to Capital City as a place to “build inexpensive cars for the masses” (Valdes-Dapena, 2004, para. 8). By 1907, Olds was encouraged by local merchants and city officials to form the REO Motor Company; among those was the Capital City police chief, who also held the roles of president and manager of Capitol City Brewing, where “from a building on the northeast corner of Turner and Clinton streets, he produced the beer that ‘once made [Capital City] famous’ ” (Dozier, 2015, para. 4).

Current owners of the brewery suffuse the space where we returned to talk and write with so much nostalgia, in this interplay of the city, its industries, and the people who lived and

worked there. While we considered and discussed threads of literacy lives and nostalgia envisioned as nostalgia for the future, signs with sayings such as “100 YEARS IN THE MAKING” hung overhead. Within the space of these complicated meanings and this dangerous nostalgia, an idealized, narrow promotional retelling that renders as untold raced, classed, and gendered lives then and now, we ask what it means to write ourselves into it, in our analyzing teachers’ literacy lives through the lens of nostalgia for the future.

### **Examining Positionalities**

**Scott.** I couldn’t help but do this work the way I taught, with conspicuous references to my own particular literacy experiences, so that thinking about nostalgia for the future recalled memories of listening to *nostalgia, ULTRA*. in my college apartment, senior year, on the verge of becoming an English teacher. Or the following summer, reflecting on my first year teaching, when I attached inordinate meaning to Blitzen Trapper’s “Black River Killer” (“But they say it’s never too late to start again”), feeling it move me at a particularly vulnerable moment in my life, post-graduation, still living in a dorm, somehow learning to be a teacher. Music does that -- as a favorite professor, Stephen, once told me, “We have no defense against it” -- but so too does literature, and I came to take what I loved best from my coursework and folded it into teaching American lit to high school juniors along the Texas-Mexico border, so that those students met Calvino and Beckett and Colson Whitehead and Jennifer Egan just as I did. We read that, and we also heard Ocean, and Blitzen Trapper and Phoenix and Alabama Shakes, played during passing periods between bells and filling the silences of five-minute free writes. My nostalgia as a White man came to inform my teaching practice, to enrich and trouble it, and I wonder now looking back why I didn’t dwell more on what that meant, why so much of my teaching was bound up so intimately with my sense of literacy self. What that says, what it did, and continues to do.



**Vaughn.** I was in sixth grade the year Power 99 FM came on the air, Philly deejay Lady B blending R&B into Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force's "Planet Rock," that sonic shifting of grown-folks disco making way for rap music. Later that spring, a friend's parent drove Nathan, Patrice, Jackie, and me on a school night across the Betsy Ross Bridge, to Center City, to check out the movie premier of *Breakin'*. Patrice won tickets in a radio call-in contest; Nathan and I wore matching Lee jeans, and Adidas with thick laces (Watson, 2000). Before the movie, someone rolled a red carpet onto the sidewalk, like they did on TV. Leaving that theater after that first movie I saw starring young Black men, I imagined identities of my friends and I as the lead characters, Turbo and Ozone, taking up roles as emcees, or DJs, or B-boys (breakdancers). That next fall, for school picture day, I wore shiny parachute pants and a zipper shirt, like Turbo in the movie. I recall Jackie, leaving the movie theater, had leaned into the ground a step from the entrance, hands on sidewalk, and spun legs into the air, freestyling the dance move called a windmill. What may it mean, these lived experiences of Philly soul, centered-in not additive to our families, communities, and schooling contexts; this nostalgia.

**Alecia.** I came to this believing in St. Pierre's (2008) notion of home as a site of theory, that we end up back there anyway -- whatever "there" has become in our fragmented sense of origin. What matters is the return, my fascination with the past, and the would-be, could-be future, in other words a remnant of nostalgia, and so this spark of nostalgia for the future was the force that brought things into existence for me. It's the myth of a return, the elusive nature of a sense of self, and a reclaiming of all the ways we walked into being, or for us three researchers -- what we brought with us (and left behind) when we met in Capital City Brewing, and when we infused our associations of theory, nostalgia, and all that we could into our understandings of Ocean's album. What stuck with me was the conviction in Ocean's voice, rippled and

intertwined in the uncertainty of everything he was working through; that we have to, we got to “believe in something, something, something.” Now this is a complicated endeavor and it is riddled with problematic notions of how we work in the world as well, how we outline the dangers, but for me St. Pierre’s words rumble and echo, and we usually do go back -- I can’t come to teaching without the poets that formed me: Marie Howe, Sharon Olds, Robert Hass, Billy Collins, and that is always a nostalgic endeavor, an enactment of attachment. I, a white woman, say all of this to say I think we can do both or all, become attached to and resist renderings of the past, present, and future and yet exist, dream, or be dreamed up; this is the place of possibilities.

### **Framing the Analysis**

In recalling our experiences with preservice teachers<sup>3</sup> in the undergraduate methods course, we identified meanings of nostalgia as “theoretical code.”<sup>4</sup> As Saldaña (2015) noted, a theoretical code purposefully denotes “the primary theme of the research [...] the central or core category [...] the major conflict, obstacle, problem, issue, or concern to participants” (p. 224). This work thus “integrates and synthesizes” codes identified,<sup>5</sup> categories developed, and themes

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<sup>3</sup> We analyzed 45 written reflections authored by preservice teachers enrolled in two sections of an undergraduate course at a large research university in the U.S. Midwest, taught by Vaughn in fall 2015 and fall 2016. Following the methods course, preservice teachers undertook a year-long teaching internship in rural, suburban, “urban emergent” and “urban characteristic” school districts (Eckert & Petrone, 2013; Milner, 2012) reflecting racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic demographics of the state. We additionally analyzed teaching activities in a lesson on found poetry in the internship-year course.

<sup>4</sup> Our analysis of written reflections authored by teachers and teacher educators began with an interest in how teachers’ own literacies shaped their teaching practices. In our first of multiple biweekly research-team meetings, we began a reading and discussion of Kirkland’s (2013) contextualizing of literacy lives of young Black men. We concurrently conducted three cycles of coding of preservice teachers’ written reflections.

<sup>5</sup> Although we began with coding, the spirit of our manuscript composed its place and interests in the theorizing that arrived through our conversations around codes. We recall for example sharing with preservice teachers Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), a novel in which the author cuts apart his favorite book, *The Street of Crocodiles*. Snippets of text left behind -- codes fluttered across pages like blown leaves -- unfolded the process of telling another story. We might do something similar with the codes we’ve made here. Our envisioning for this piece moved with us and through us as this simultaneous and complicated questioning and enacting of what we may mean by coding.

to theorize with our core construct, building with Miller's (2010) *nostalgia for the future* as "theoretical explanation" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 224) in exploring the literary lives of preservice teachers. We understood this approach as necessarily in tension, given resonant critical scholarship and contemporary violence associated with nostalgia, with our own experiences and purposes for the work. Thinking with and through nostalgia, we argue, "moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction" (p. 224): evoking dangerous nostalgia and envisioning nostalgia for the future evokes possibilities for literacy teachers and students working toward more just futures.

### **Finding Nostalgia for the Future in the Writing of Preservice Teachers**

In exploring meanings of nostalgia for the future in the literacy lives of preservice teachers, we found nostalgia embedded throughout preservice teachers' written reflections, operating both promisingly, informing imagined futures towards justice, and problematically, as a distorting lens idealizing past, present, and future practice. In doing so, we note the ways preservice teachers, as did Ocean, "literalize both [their] nostalgic impulses and the odd future of

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We returned then to the codes woven into the history of this piece and with them we complicated our theorizing. We had first each coded one third of 45 written reflections using sentence-level in vivo coding. Saldaña (2015) explains in vivo coding as an analysis approach that attends to "voice" of participants (p. 106). Therefore, we emphasized preservice teachers' own languaging of how they understood teaching paradigms in conversation with course texts. We identified as first-cycle codes preservice teachers' discussion of their own literacy lives in conversation with Kirkland (2013), Cremin et al. (2012), and Meyer (1996). We identified 191 first-cycle codes (for ex., "my favorite English teacher found participation important, and I was always able to say, 'I never thought about it that way.'"; and "I see the English classroom as a place where students can synthesize the stories of others with their own experiences in order to further their understanding of life and the impact they have as global citizens.") We then read across initial codes and developed 14 categories (for ex., "relationship between literature and literacy lives" and "preservice teachers in-school literacy / learning experiences as elementary/high school student"). We further collapsed the 14 categories; in conversation with analytic memoing, we asked comparative questions of the data such as "What texts do teachers of literacy decide to bring into their classrooms?" During the coding of preservice teacher's written reflections, Scott and Alecia taught the found-poetry lesson, further prompting our analysis of questions posed by teachers that expressed notions of nostalgia.

Across the data set, we subsequently examined teachers' literacy lives as enacted across four themes: exploring literacy lives as a student; enacting literacy practices; considering purposes of literature; and literacy lives as envisioning teaching stances. In developing themes, we were compelled by the intertwined nature of literacy lives and nostalgia. We considered in what ways may preservice teachers calling upon their literacy lives suggest nostalgic renderings of teaching and learning, gesturing toward a nostalgia for the future.

which [they are] a part” (O’Neill, 2011, para. 2). Moreover, in considering *nostalgia for the future* as a lens distinct from *nostalgia*, we understand preservice teachers as expressing in their reflections a more engaging literacy pedagogy for their students than what they had experienced themselves. We envision such nostalgia for the future as an affirmative frame for envisioning practice more humanely, equitably, and justly. We assert both dangers and affordances in theorizing nostalgia for the future for understanding teachers’ literacy lives and pedagogical practices.

### **Dangerous Nostalgia**

Jordan<sup>6</sup>, a preservice teacher, reflecting on his literacy past in secondary English classrooms, noted: “Everyone has had that one really awesome English teacher that makes them fall in love with Gatsby or Shakespeare or whomever, we’ve all had one. Well, I didn’t.” In this example Jordan threads doubt into the ways preservice teachers have traditionally believed English teaching to be and implores us towards (re)vision, underscoring broad notions of what we think English teaching and learning may look like. In particular, Jordan cautions about what we think of as a danger of nostalgia. We consider similarly Ocean’s assertion of nostalgia for the future as nostalgia for something that did not happen or never was when thinking of his own experience growing up without a father: “You can’t miss what you ain’t had. / Well, I can -- I’m sad.” Jordan constructs a nostalgia imbued with what he perceives as past teaching experience that preservice teachers believed to be “good,” just as Ocean envisioned within his personal experience a past worth missing. Jordan similarly presents a notion of what could have been, emphasized with a realization of loss: The danger is in the assertion that this past may have been better; the danger is in the assumption of grief. What we recognize is the alluring nature to

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<sup>6</sup> Names are pseudonyms.

reminisce on the past without critique, or the conjuring of a future despite the very real possibility of its failure.

On the other hand, preservice teachers, reflecting on literacy lives as students, asserted critiques of being instructed in the canon of classics as provoking feelings of disconnection from teachers and literacy curricula that they were led to believe they would love. As Casey remarked, “I see next to no room for personal growth when the texts a student will read for their class has been picked for them to read 15 years prior to them studying it.” Casey raises a longstanding tension of English curriculum: the excluding or inviting in of personal experiences when we choose texts without regard to both students’ and teachers’ literacy lives. Macaluso (2016) critiques the canon, as the body of traditionally privileged texts in secondary English classrooms, for how it can hold intensely nostalgic value for future English teachers. Reflecting on his own past life as a secondary English teacher, Macaluso notes:

I fell so in love with these [canonical] books and with the act of reading that, after junior year, I knew there was only one option for me: I was going to someday teach these same books [...] the “great works” of the modern world. (p. 5)

Usefully, Macaluso (2016) extends the frame of the canon as a body of texts to consider “canonicity” in the secondary English classroom as a discursive frame shaping teaching practices. Thus, it’s not just that the texts English teachers choose are shaped by nostalgia; the canon also shapes instructional practices, ways of framing, and of envisioning the future work of English teachers.

We initially and continue to express worry in conceptualizing literacy lives as nostalgic, given pejorative consequences of the word as a romanticization of the past inhibiting present and future action. For example, as we (Scott and Alecia) reflected on the lesson we co-taught to

teacher interns, we noted poems we “loved,” “that stuck with” us, that we had “found useful” and “taught to our own English students” (Research team meeting, 7/5/17). Similarly Skyler, in her reflection, recalled, “My original motive for becoming an English teacher was my love of literature and the hope that I could help other students gain this appreciation as well.” Across these memories of preservice teachers’ teaching, we hear echoed a fondness for our pasts in the words of Chance the Rapper’s “Summer Friends”:

The past tense, past bedtime  
Way back then when everything we read was real  
And everything we said rhymed  
Wide eyed kids being kids  
When did you stop?

We recognize and critique this affection for the past as approach to curriculum, for how it may make the teaching and ways texts resonate with us as teachers, even texts we love, about *us* and not our students. Although nostalgia for the future, in its various forms, may offer ways to teach with texts that have come to and continue to matter in our lives, preservice teachers constructed meanings of nostalgia as a narrowed, problematic lensing for choosing texts and developing curriculum.

Casey, in asking “what texts should we teach?”, suggests for example that more contemporary works reflecting the plurality of students in contemporary U.S. English classrooms will enhance students’ personal growth. Casey’s experiences with canonical texts points to an erasure of diverse perspectives: a dangerous nostalgia. Preservice teachers underscored then, as Kirkland (2013) observed, “the determinations that schools make when privileging forms of literacy endemic to particular (but not all) groups” (p. 10). In other words, nostalgia as it has

been constructed and codified in the secondary curriculum excludes and marginalizes, just as it privileges particular white, male, Anglo traditions. Moreover, nostalgia plays a role in maintaining and extending the legacy of this canon, further marginalizing those excluded in the past. For preservice teachers writing about nostalgia in ways we situate as “dangerous”, teaching English comes to mean rejecting ways they had been taught reading and writing in favor of other, less deadening, more humane ways.

### **Envisioning Nostalgia for the Future**

Underscoring ways preservice teachers’ literacy lives may be rendered as nostalgia in the curricula and teaching of English classrooms, preservice teachers across written reflections evoked experiences of disconnection and loss, drawing on the past to envision a different way forward. Preservice teachers sought in their writing to create a more engaging literacy pedagogy for students than what they had experienced themselves, a nostalgia for the future. For example, preservice teachers recalled prior experiences in English classrooms as odes to what not to do. Riley thus shares, “When being taught in high school English classes my teachers liked to ask, ‘What’s the so what? Why are we reading this?’. [Yet] often I did not receive the answer to my question.” Riley articulates a tension of teaching practice where preservice teachers may seek to make familiar moves they have been taught, such as asking students, “What’s the so what?”, yet not fully giving space for students to consider possibilities that might better build on youths’ lived experiences and social identities (Watson, 2018). A danger of nostalgia, in this way, is an idealizing of past teachers, and their practices, enclosing our perspectives in sentimentality. In his writing, Riley attempts to dismantle this notion of sentimentality, this dangerous nostalgia, of who gets the space to be listened to, an examining and expanding of certain teaching practices we have come to believe are valuable. In this, Riley recalls the central image of Billy Collins’

“Introduction to Poetry”, in which a teacher laments the ways students go about “beating a text with a hose to find out what it really means”, this always positioning students as required to say what matters. Although we hope preservice teachers learn from and with their pasts in imagining engaging literacy instruction, we understand a danger in preservice teachers relying on past experiences as such reminiscing focuses preservice teachers too much on *their* past. We understand nostalgia as a problematic projection of individuals’ experiences onto others, preventing us from listening to and acting with youth in ways that build with their experiences.

### **Affordances of Nostalgia for the Future**

We thus read preservice teachers’ reflections through lensings of nostalgia for the future, drawn across St. Pierre, Miller, and Ocean, in seeking to understand affordances offered as a way of framing considerations of teachers’ shifting identities and literacy lives. For example, Ellison, a preservice teacher, related their own nostalgia for childhood to envisioning a future identity through texts, noting, “I believe that as children we all wanted to be like the heroes and heroines from the stories that we grew up with.” While we do not know exactly which stories Ellison references, and who was written in or left out of those stories, they compel one understanding of nostalgia as underscoring ways teachers’ literacy lives, particularly the stories they encountered in their pasts, come to shape their futures. But at the same time, such a nostalgia for the future can point to ways once and future selves become lost, as Ellison reflects:

with the emphasis on becoming a successful person in modern society being constantly driven to the forefront of the minds of children there has been a loss for the creativity that once held a prominent place in their souls.

We consider what may it mean to interrogate this nostalgia for the future as a reclaiming of the primacy of creativity in literacy education. We recall the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, speaking of



youth creativity and evoking William Stafford, who when asked, “When did you become a poet?” would respond, “That’s not the right question [...] The question is, ‘When did you stop being a poet?’” Ellison similarly understands a nostalgic reclaiming of childhood creativity as affording different futures for students: “This creativity, once reignited, can become the blazing drive to create a better world. I firmly believe that through learning from literature my students will gain that spark that reawakens that creativity.” We find here what may be understood as a popularized, romantic framing of nostalgia important to interrogate for the ways it renders possibilities toward more just futures. Pointedly, this envisioning of nostalgia for the future can be situated as a counterpoint to the violent nostalgia of contemporary rhetoric. Nostalgia for the future in preservice teachers’ conceptualizations serves to position the work of justice going forward, rather than circling back. In that, it tussles with conflicts with which the protagonist struggles toward the ending of *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958/2006): “Perhaps my best years are gone. [...] But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now” (p. 223). In rethinking nostalgia embedded across narratives, we reimagine ways teachers may bring their passions into classrooms.

Preservice teachers’ written reflections further revealed an “unearthing” of human practice, a constructing and telling of individual narratives (Kirkland, 2013, p. 10). Marion for instance discussed how previous teachers influenced teacher moves she intends to enact: “I want to teach middle school because as I look back on my own experience, I had two teachers who truly uplifted my spirit and made me think about who I was as a person.” Similarly, as Sudduth (2011) observed, Ocean in *nostalgia, ULTRA*. creates “a collection of sounds that he finds emotionally meaningful.” Marley, a preservice teacher, considers likewise moments that “uplifted her spirit,” that were made meaningful to her. These two teachers shaped contexts

through the collecting and dispersing of particular moments, curricula, and ways of teaching that engaged Marion in constructing her own person, creating instances of resonance toward future teaching practice. Another teacher, Sidney, discussed a similar experience:

What resonated with me was what resonated when I initially decided to become a teacher: meaningful interactions. My favorite teacher talked to me as if I were a person, rather than a student that has an empty head that requires knowledge to fill in the space as authoritarian-type teachers often do.

Through Sidney's remarks, reminding us as resonant particulars (Zwicky, 2013), we believe the intersections of past, present, and future nostalgia engage the human, relational moments of pedagogy, ones in which, as Sidney notes, she felt she was seen as a person. In this way, we see these nostalgic moments folded into both perceptions of how the past was made meaningful, and how to engage the meaningful in the future, providing examples for what may particularly make teaching matter to both the teacher and students and what may make educational work a humanizing endeavor. In asking preservice teachers to revisit moments of resonance or ones contextualized within their literacy lives, preservice teachers are able to linger in spaces of connection and shared knowledge invoking "meaningful interactions."

For Scott and Alecia, reading our own teaching in the internship-year course through a lensing of nostalgia for the future offered relational possibilities supporting our work as teachers of literacy education. We asked preservice teachers in our found-poetry lesson to make blackout poems, ripping pages out of texts to create poetry of their own. In doing so we sought for preservice teachers to engage with their emotions around texts (Neville, 2018). We therefore deliberately chose books we thought preservice teachers would be attached to; collectively, we tore pages out of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. We

recognize, of course, the nostalgia involved in these selections, and that we, as teacher educators, chose the texts *for* our students, as if we might know what they would be attached to. In choosing these texts, we thus drew nostalgically on our own emotional attachments. The books were met fondly by many students, who vocalized their own nostalgic remembrances of them. This ripping out pages from beloved texts as an imagining of new stories revealed a particular usefulness of such texts. We understand nostalgia as resonating with students, and particularly, we find, with preservice teachers: the nostalgic texts we love may evoke a past to project a future. We ask how may this work embolden possibilities of what preservice teachers will envision for their students, and how might we encourage and imagine stances of justice and meaning-making toward more equitable futures.

### **Scholarly Significance**

This inquiry helps imagine the elusive nature of English teacher practice, rendering possibilities for future ways teachers' literacy lives shape and are shaped by experiences and instruction. Examining literacy lives of teachers enabled us to build upon and extend theoretical perspectives across contexts of secondary English teaching and teacher-education practice and research. Moreover, we sought to complicate a single story (Adichie, 2009) of English teaching and of teacher education: that students and preservice teachers become who we teach them to be. Rather we recognize that we may offer preservice teachers a collection of teaching practices around reading and writing and speaking and listening, but it is their lensings tied up in the past, present and future moments of schooling that thread their lives as teachers. These lensings of nostalgia call attention to our tendency to rely on our own idealized understandings: we seek to think with how this self-awareness may encourage new forms of criticality suffused in both

wondrous and flawed teacher practices, thus bolstering ways we co-create futures with and for our students and teachers.

For literacy researchers and English teacher educators, we grapple with how considering nostalgia for the future provides conceptual language as teacher practice in preservice teachers' reflective writing. Or, as Ocean sings in "Swim good," "I'm about to drive in the ocean. I'ma try to swim from something bigger than me." Himmelman (2013) suggested meanings in the words Ocean sings in the song "There Will Be Tears" that may be understood as evoking possibilities of literacy lives as nostalgia for the future:

His music longs for things past and possible happiness lost, the kind of thing we all do when we look back and simultaneously romanticize the past and wish it had been different. Even the interludes on his records -- the whirring cassette players and analog alarm clocks and recondite movie audio -- are of an era that Ocean was mostly too young to have experienced directly, as are the old BMWs he rebuilds with such care. But he longs for these things just the same, and his creative triumph is that he has found his own musical and lyrical language to express that longing. Nostalgia, ultra. (para. 50)

Understanding English teacher education practice through lensings of Ocean, Miller, and St. Pierre offers space to call upon and render past, present, and future ways of teaching; this calling upon distills instructional and curriculum practices in order to provide a rich critical encounter with how, why, and what we teach. Himmelman (2013) shared another exchange with Ocean, seven months after Ocean's release of the album *channel ORANGE*:

"Art's everything we hope life would be, a lot of times," Ocean said to me as we sat outside the BMW repair shop in North Hollywood, speaking to each other in the dark. "That's what I get from it. And that's what I've tried to do. In the storytelling and the

sonics and everything. That's what I've tried to do, because I just think that's the purpose of art. Push, you know?" (para. 51).

More specifically, this envisioning of teacher practice asks us to parse what makes teaching meaningful work, and to engage with the "collected sounds," the "storytelling, and the sonics and everything" (para. 51) through the interactions and reactions of teaching and learning, designing and implementing curricular and pedagogical practices as invitations to evoke resonant and memorable experiences (Petchauer, 2018). Reading with and through our nostalgia for the future calls attention to the frames (Butler, 2010) which limit what we can and cannot see as English educators. This work asks that we (re)imagine those frames through and as nostalgia for the future, inviting an analysis of the particularities of literacy and teaching and teacher education practice, a moving with the field of English education toward more humane and equitable possibilities.

Building on St. Pierre's (2008) theorizing of nostalgia, we think too that our inquiry evidences how teacher educators may come to consider "home as a site of theory, as a site of both identification and rupture." (p. 119). We conceive as St. Pierre does of "home" broadly here, as an unearthing of preservice teachers' pasts (Kirkland, 2013), the lives they've lived and their intersections with English pedagogy, for ways it might help them to better envision the teachers they'd like to become. Nostalgia for the future affords a frame toward considering the past while also orienting preservice teachers forward, building on that past critically for the work of imagining and constructing more just worlds for their future students.

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