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Confronting Colonial Control: Afrofuturist Literacy Stances Versus Book Bans in the Battle for Spacetime

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Received: 8 April 2025 | Revised: 11 April 2025 | Accepted: 5 June 2025

Funding: The author received no specific funding for this work.

Keywords: Afrofuturism | Afrofuturist technologies | colonialism | meta-ethnography | text selection | white settler futurity

ABSTRACT

While much of the research on censorship and book banning rightly emphasizes efforts to silence and erase people who do not identify as white cis-heteronormative men, the role of colonialism in the construction and contextualization of censorship is underexplored. However, censorship's primary goal is to obtain power over stories—the control over the narration of the national narrative, the dominion over social memory's plot sequence, and the authority to decide the protagonists and antagonists of history. Narrative is essential to the composition and conservation of empire, enabling settler colonialists to rule the land, the people, and the future. Thus, censoring books written by and about people minoritized in a white cis-heteropatriarchal capitalist society is enacted to ensure that white supremacy flourishes and guarantees that the story of the United States is one in which white people maintain control over the construction of the land, its people, its history, and its futurity. This article rises from this context. Specifically, the author employs meta-ethnography to review existing literacy scholarship to highlight how white-centric ideologies influence in-service and pre-service teachers' text selection practices. Rather than just critique common stances, the author also conceptualizes Afrofuturist literacy stances as another textual possibility. In doing so, the author argues that Afrofuturist literacy stances can act as one liberatory intervention in the broader collective struggle against the spacetime imperialism of censored literacies.

The history of English is inextricably tied to the history of war, to the history of empire; they cannot be separated. Hence, our literature cannot be separated from these histories.

Coste Lewis 2016

reflected, contested, and even decided in narrative, the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and merging is very important to culture and imperialism.

Said 1993, xii—xiii

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were

In the landscape of contemporary discourse, stories are weapons, instruments that can be wielded to construct or dismantle reality. Consider the executive order, Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling (The White House, 2025),

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which defines “discriminatory equity ideology” as any belief that challenges white supremacy culture and scripts the boundaries of permissible thought. With surgical precision, the text declares that discussions of systemic racism as inherent to social structures are themselves discriminatory and that exploring how race might inform an individual’s social experience constitutes a form of prohibited discourse. By suggesting that concepts like objectivity and racial colorblindness are foundational to national ideologies, the document transforms linguistic definition into a mechanism of intellectual suppression. By declaring certain perspectives as inherently “discriminatory,” it preemptively delegitimizes entire modes of intellectual inquiry. Each carefully constructed clause is a razor-thin line between expression and erasure, between understanding and willful delusion. Ultimately, the story of the executive order is a narrative of epistemic violence, a calculated attempt to freeze social understanding, arrest the dynamic process of meaning-making, and preserve existing power structures by rendering critical perspectives not just invisible, but unspeakable, illegal. It is an act of linguistic containment, where the boundaries of acceptable thought are fundamentally redrawn to preserve a carefully curated spatial-temporal narrative, a cartography of controlled meaning that seeks to enslave the flow of historical and social understanding.

Such linguistic control is neither unprecedented nor accidental. Throughout history, those in power have weaponized narrative as a form of territorial management because they recognize that stories can be interventions with the power to (re)shape collective memory and understanding. Works like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* exposed the complex realities of colonialism, while Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* illuminated social injustices that sparked legislative reform. John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* ignited movements for farmworkers’ rights, and James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* forced readers to reckon with the deep-seated racial inequities that permeated American society. In each instance, stories were critical tools for dismantling oppressive narratives, revealing how words can shatter dominant ideological boundaries and reshape collective knowledge. These texts carved out new spaces of understanding, interrupting linear narratives of power and creating alternative timelines of meaning that challenged established historical and social geographies. Because stories are powerful instruments that can be used to control or liberate, change or stagnate, and express or suppress, it is no wonder why they are strategically shared or censored in one of the nation’s most contentious battlegrounds: schools.

Educational institutions have long recognized the transformative potential of stories, which is precisely why they have become the most critical sites of narrative management. Book bans and curriculum restrictions have become the primary tools for controlling which stories can be told, heard, and remembered. As examples, in Ohio, an elementary teacher was suspended for having books with LGBTQ+ characters in her classroom library (Mitchell 2024). A high school teacher in Oklahoma had her teaching certificate revoked for sharing a QR code linking to an online library containing banned books (Lathan 2024). Multiple states, including Indiana and Arkansas, have passed laws that would make educators and librarians vulnerable to harsh punishments, including jail time, for providing “obscene” material to minors (Crosby and Sims 2025). Schools are places

of learning, but they are also powerful apparatuses of social reproduction, where the stories we tell (and do not tell) shape how entire generations understand themselves, their communities, and the broader social world. Hence, each banned book and each censored narrative represents a tactical intervention in the struggle for ideological control.

By placing parameters around how and if discussions about race, racism, white supremacy, antiblackness, and systemic oppression take place, attempts to censor books become a colonialist endeavor to control the narrative of society—past, present, and future. For instance, with whiteness at the helm of the global story, the past can be rewritten to emphasize a simplified version of history that spotlights a white-centric viewpoint and minimizes (or erases) the impacts of antiblack racism. With dominant control over the narrative, the present can be reconstructed so that stories of Black history, Black joy, and Black resistance are viewed as divisive and abhorrent to the neoliberalist project of social justice and racial progress (Dumas and Ross 2016). With whiteness as the ideological lens through which the national story is told, the future can be reshaped to reinforce white supremacy culture (Okun 2019). The control over stories ensures that pedagogies emphasizing the examination, dismantling, and/or critique of mechanisms of oppression can be now (and forever) considered taboo, marginalized, and excluded from mainstream discourse. Thus, book bans resulting from executive orders and racist policies are more than just content disputes. They are strategic weapons in the battle over spacetime—or how we perceive our physical reality and our temporal worlds—in an effort to control historical interpretation, contemporary discourse, and future possibilities.

Considering how stories are weapons that can bolster or challenge the dominant story, it is crucial for literacy educators to recognize the power of text selection and how personal ideologies shape the text selection process. More importantly, it is important for us to support each other in the textual struggle, arming ourselves with the knowledge necessary to foster pluralistic futurity in the face of white supremacy. Toward that end, this article employs meta-ethnography to review existing literacy scholarship to highlight how white-centric ideologies influence in-service and pre-service teachers’ text selection practices. Rather than just critique common stances, I then conceptualize Afrofuturist literacy stances—defined as the pedagogical technologies educators use to incorporate principles and themes of Blackness that empower students to reclaim and reimagine historical narratives, engage in future-oriented thinking, employ collective history and memory, and break from oppressionistic thinking—as an alternative textual possibility. In doing so, I argue that Afrofuturist literacy stances can act as one liberatory intervention in the broader collective struggle against the spacetime imperialism of censored literacies.

1 | Analyzing Censored Literacies Through Meta-Ethnography

Meta-ethnography (Noblit and Hare 1988) is a literature review method in which the researcher conducts a comparative textual analysis of previously published studies. Researchers using this method endeavor to “reimagine original data within

existing studies [and] privilege participant voices” (Neal-Jackson 2018, 511), which contrasts from other methods, like meta-analyses, that focus on quantitative summaries. In fact, meta-ethnographers aim to reframe questions posed in earlier research, interpreting them through the lens of the studies being compared, thus enabling the researcher to arrive at cross-case conclusions that reveal analogies between ideas and “reciprocal translations of studies into one another” (511). Said simply, meta-ethnography enables the researcher to find commonalities across studies to enhance meaning and understanding of a specific phenomenon, concept, or idea.

Meta-ethnography is a complex process, but there are established criteria for employing the method (Neal-Jackson 2018; Noblit and Hare 1988; Soundy and Heneghan 2022). Specifically, researchers begin by considering their positionalities because meta-ethnographies reveal as much about the perspective of the researcher as they do about the conclusions of the analysis (Noblit and Hare 1988). They then identify a central intellectual topic of interest and curate relevant articles. Next, they read and analyze the articles to identify relationships and contradictions between them. Finally, the scholar translates the studies using a unifying metaphor that is both responsible and respectful to the intended audience.

Considering the parameters of the method, I begin by documenting how I entered this work. Succinctly, I identify as a Black woman critical literacy scholar with occupational locations that include former high school English teacher and current English teacher educator, so the text selection stances English educators assume are of great importance to me. Additionally, as someone whose research exists at the nexus of secondary literacy, social justice, criticality, and the speculative, I am particularly attuned to how white supremacy culture and colonialism—with their pervasive influence on educational practices—infiltrate English education, and I constantly contemplate how literacy stakeholders can unmoor ourselves from the dominance of whiteness in the field. These facets of my cultural, occupational, and epistemological background influenced the data generation and analytic process.

After considering my positionality, I began with a particular interest: how white supremacy culture (Okun 2019) via colonialist ideologies might influence English teachers’ text selection practices and how those practices might be disrupted. To explore this topic, I searched several databases (e.g., Academic Search Ultimate, Google Scholar, JStor, EBSCO, and ProQuest) for articles using a combination of search terms: (a) text selection, (b) English OR literacy, (c) English education OR literacy education, and (d) teacher OR educator. This approach yielded hundreds of articles, which I narrowed using targeted inclusion criteria. Following the guidance of Noblit and Hare (1988), who argued that meta-ethnographies should emphasize interpretive, qualitative studies, I excluded quantitative articles. Next, because I was interested in scholarly documentation of teacher text selection practices, I prioritized peer-reviewed articles that included direct accounts from teachers (via interview, open-ended survey response, field notes, etc.), as these provided a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and practices behind text selection. Due to the racial undertones surrounding book bans in the United

States (as evidenced by a large number of books banned due to the race of the protagonists (PEN America 2024)), I also centered my search on articles within my national context. Lastly, considering book banning’s direct impact on literacy education, I highlighted articles within that disciplinary area. This process yielded 44 articles for review.

Central to my analysis was understanding how colonialism subtly influenced text selection, often reinforcing Eurocentric narratives while marginalizing diverse, non-Western perspectives. Colonial influences in literacy education are not always explicit but manifest through elusive biases in text choices, where canonical works that emphasize Western values, history, and voices are prioritized while texts that challenge colonial or Eurocentric norms are minoritized. Even teachers with a desire to foster inclusivity often unknowingly perpetuate this cycle due to the broader educational system’s entanglement with colonial legacies. Colonialism operates like a hidden virus in the background, embedded in established curricula, teacher training, and even teacher preference, thereby normalizing the exclusion of non-white non-Western knowledge systems.

To synthesize the articles, then, I first paid close attention to how scholars classified, named, and/or categorized teacher talk, especially in terms of how they framed the language participants used when discussing texts. I also considered how seemingly neutral talk by teacher participants masked value judgments and communicated ideological biases. Guided by my background in critical literacy, I carefully analyzed the power dynamics inherent in teachers’ curricular choices. I then developed an inductive categorization process that helped me to group articles and/or article excerpts into various inductive categories (e.g., white-centric, racism, personal preference, fear, student-centered, teacher-centered, canon, history of use, liberatory). This approach allowed me to explore how teachers approached text selection and the ideological motivations behind those choices.

After my initial analysis, I struggled to group my findings into stances because, even though scholars have explored the impact of text selection on English classrooms (Bunch et al. 2014; Fisher and Frey 2015; Holloway and Greig 2011; Truman et al. 2022; Yates et al. 2019), few have systematically identified and categorized the various stances educators adopt in the text selection process. However, a breakthrough came through Dávila’s (2022) research, which aimed “to illuminate the unconscious ideological discourses and presumptions of dominant sociocultural groups that can routinely underlie the territorialization of youth literature by/for/about historically marginalized people” (377). Dávila identified eight prevalent stances educators use when selecting children’s literature: curriculum-first, universalist, law abiding, not in my backyard (NIMBY), protection, teach what you know, tried and true, personal exemption, and risk aversion. This framework offered a valuable basis for pinpointing what teachers’ text selection stances make possible or impossible in the ELA classroom. To comprehensively understand these stances, I integrated Dávila’s definitions with my own inductive coding to reveal connections between colonialism, racism, and white supremacy culture in educational text selection. For instance, I grouped some of the articles that included the inductive codes “canon” and “history of use,” with Dávila’s “teach what

you know” stance, and I grouped several articles with a fear label under Dávila’s “risk aversion” stance.

Lastly, following Noblit and Hare’s (1988) emphasis on the analytical power of metaphors as linguistic tools, I employed a technological metaphor to organize and translate the research studies. By mapping characteristics from one conceptual domain (technology) onto another (text selection), I hoped to create new insights, revealing hidden relationships and underlying dynamics that might remain obscured by literal description. The technological metaphor served as an interpretive lens, allowing me to reimagine text selection as a dynamic, relational practice. Further, it allowed me to consider how text selection itself might act as a colonialist technology. Just as technology simultaneously reflects and shapes societal structures, text selection emerges from a nuanced interplay of institutional, social, and personal forces. The metaphor helped me to illuminate how text selection is not a static process, but a continually evolving system influenced by socio-political contexts, institutional pressures, and the personal beliefs of educators.

2 | Thinking Technologically

Technology, in an onto-epistemological sense, is more than just the creation of tools and machines; it encompasses ways of perceiving, organizing, and making sense of the world. Applying this understanding to colonialism involves examining not just the people or the land, but the entire operational framework of the colonial enterprise. As paperson (2017) suggested, “thinking about technologies moves us a little bit out of the trap of thinking about specific identities as well-defined colonizers or as the fixed targets of necropolitics. Instead, we can see the transit of empire as involving the commute of technologies and a translation of ideologies and logics” (par. 21). Said another way, conceptualizing colonialism as a technology makes possible an analysis of the systematic and organized set of practices designed to control, influence, and shape societies toward white-centric norms, while simultaneously contributing to the social, emotional, psychological, and physical death of minoritized Others. It makes it possible to reveal how colonialism adapts its methods of control and repression according to global power dynamics and how it spreads and evolves across regions and contexts.

However, if technologies of colonialism are engineered to sustain subjugation, then we need tools capable of disrupting the machinery of oppression. For every force, there must be a corresponding counter force. Afrofuturism, when viewed as a technology, offers that potential challenge to colonialist frameworks. Specifically, Afrofuturism views race and racism as human-made machinations imbued with power imbalances. Thus, Afrofuturist technologies can be understood as counterprograms, mechanisms that offer alternatives that compete and contrast with the program of white supremacy (Bould 2019; Womack 2013). They present a means to manufacture tools capable of recovering and reimagining past, present, and future narratives that settler colonialist stories have tried to erase in hopes of transforming existing power structures (Eshun 2003). In essence, while dominant technological paradigms often reinforce and perpetuate prevailing power structures while marginalizing alternative and/or dissenting perspectives, Afrofuturist

technologies are designed to reclaim and reconfigure Black historical narratives and cultural legacies that have been systematically suppressed or neglected. These technologies are not merely reactive responses to existing inequities; instead, they are proactive efforts to imagine and construct alternative futures, otherwise worlds in which liberation and pluralism are central.

In the following sections, I explore the technologies of colonialism through a focus on white settler futurity within the context of censored literacies, revealing how these technologies function to perpetuate exclusionary futures in literacy education. Then, I consider how literacy educators might manufacture text selection as an Afrofuturist technology capable of disrupting systemic colonialism. By focusing on technologies in this way, I aim to emphasize not the “who” of settler colonialism or Afrofuturism, but the “how”, the “who next” (paperson 2017), and the “what if.” In doing so, I underscore the transformative power of technologies—both colonial and Afrofuturist—in shaping the historical, contemporary, and future (literacy) world.

3 | Securing Spacetime: Technologies of White Settler Futurity

Dotson (2018) identified three settler colonialist technologies employed in the United States: “logics of elimination, doctrines of discovery, and a triadic structuring of ‘settler-native-slave’” (p. 193). The logic of elimination involves the systematic replacement of Indigenous peoples by settlers who continually seek to expand their territory at the expense of the original inhabitants (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013). This process, described by Wolfe (2006) as “destroying to replace” (p. 388), involves the use of various tactics such as assimilation, violence, renaming, resocialization, and religion to erase Indigenous histories, cultures, and populations and substitute them with white settlers, white settlements, and white supremacy. The doctrines of discovery further the colonialist agenda by asserting that settlers have the right to claim lands they “discover” and to exercise dominion over the resources and people within those lands. These doctrines provide a legal and moral justification for invasion, capture, kidnapping, and enslavement, thereby facilitating the elimination of Indigenous peoples. As Dotson (2018) noted, “discovery justified elimination and elimination justified discovery” (p. 194), reflecting the interdependent relationship between the justification for seizing land and the justification for the ongoing eradication of its original inhabitants.

The settler-native-slave triad is a technology that does not represent fixed identities, but categories that illuminate ongoing geographical power relations (Tuck and Yang 2012; Wolfe 2006). They are not just nouns, but actions. As paperson (2017) articulated, the “settler” is not a static identity but represents “the idealized juridical space granted to normative settler citizens and the idealized exceptionalism by which the settler state exerts its sovereignty” (p. 10). Settler technologies exist on a continuum of advantageous or detrimental depending on a person’s identity, location, and historical context. Thus, they reflect the shifting privileges and entitlements of those who benefit from the settler colonial system. The native, in contrast, is not merely an Indigenous identity but signifies “a world to be obliterated...a site of exception for that which and those who are written as premodern, primitive, and

thus ‘before’ law and ‘before’ rights” (p. 10). These technologies of erasure ensure that Indigenous peoples are stripped of recognizable laws and rights within the settler state, rendering them invisible or irrelevant to the dominant legal and social order. The “slave” represents how Blackness is transmuted into a condition of exploitation and dehumanization. This technology attaches “ontological illegality or criminal presence, landlessness, lethal geographies, carceral apparatuses, trafficking and abduction, nonpersonhood, and so on” (p. 12) to Black peoples, emphasizing how Black lives are continuously marginalized and devalued within the settler colonial structure. In this triadic system, each category serves to reinforce the settler colonial order by upholding power imbalances and entitlements. The “settler” benefits from the displacement and marginalization of the “native,” and the exploitation and criminalization of the “slave,” thereby sustaining the dominance and expansion of settler colonialism. This dynamic creates the cycle of exclusion and violence deeply embedded in the foundation of the United States.

While these mechanisms of settler colonialism are technologies deeply woven into our collective past, they are also future-oriented mechanisms that rely on calculation, imagination, and narration to envision a future in which the land and its people are permanently subjugated (Brousseau 2021; Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013). Recognizing these technologies as both historical and future-oriented emphasizes their ongoing influence, especially in relation to text selection and censored literacies. As examples, the logic of elimination, by promoting the erasure of Indigenous histories and cultures, impacts which texts are deemed worthy of inclusion in curricula and libraries. Texts that align with settler colonial perspectives are often privileged, while those that challenge or critique settler narratives are marginalized or excluded. Settler texts seek to destroy the importance of minoritized stories and replace them with those that uplift white settler ideologies. The doctrines of discovery contribute to text selection by legitimizing narratives that justify settler expansion and control. Texts that perpetuate the notion of settlers’ inherent right to claim and dominate land are often endorsed, while minoritized voices and perspectives that contest these doctrines are systematically excluded. Said another way, texts that emphasize the rights of settlers to own land, people, and place are uplifted and stories that highlight the self-determination of minoritized Others are rendered divisive.

The triadic structuring of “settler-native-slave” further influences text selection by reinforcing the roles and representations assigned to different groups within the colonial framework. Texts that affirm the supremacy of the settler, the marginalization of the native, and the dehumanization of the slave are more likely to be included, while those that offer critical, alternative, or pluralistic perspectives are omitted. This triadic system perpetuates power imbalances and maintains the dominant colonial order through the control of which narratives are preserved and circulated. In each example, the maintenance of colonial ideologies through text selection and censored literacies ensures a colonialist future by perpetuating existing power structures and suppressing alternative perspectives. By controlling which narratives are promoted and which are marginalized, settler colonial technologies sustain a cycle of exclusion and dominance, reinforcing the ideological and material conditions necessary for the ongoing subjugation of marginalized communities. Further, by controlling which texts are

allowed entry into the classroom, white settler colonialist logics “preprogram the present” (Eshun 2003, 291) in hopes of predicting and controlling the collective future.

4 | Power and Text Selection: White Settler Futurist Technologies at Work

In the following sections, I bring together ideas of settler colonialism with text selection stances, using the metaphor of technology to outline how white settler futurity functions within the context of English and literacy education.

4.1 | Text Selection as Doctrines of Discovery

The curriculum-first stance involves selecting texts according to formalized guidelines or standards set by educational policies or bodies (e.g., AP, SAT, and Great Books). An example of this stance was evident during the era of the common core state standards (CCSS), when many educators selected texts from the grade-level exemplars included in the standards document. As a nearly nationwide policy initiative, the CCSS aimed to promote rigor and complexity in reading materials by foregrounding a balance of canonical and contemporary texts, emphasizing critical thinking and analytical skills, and gradually increasing text complexity throughout a young person’s education. However, despite the array of stories, drama, poetry, and informational exemplar texts, scholars like Schieble (2014) and Rush et al. (2011) found that most were canonical and written by white men. Texts written by women and Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, and Multiracial authors were included, but they were fewer in number. Of course, the CCSS documents indicated that the list of exemplars was a compilation of suggestions, allowing space for other texts that could be used to meet the standards requirements. Nonetheless, Watkins and Ostenson (2015) found that these exemplar lists were often classified as *de facto* requirements because many of the texts were in public domain (addressing school budget and resource constraints as well as time limitations for teachers) and they had potential connections to state assessments (aligning the use of exemplars with the possibility of increased student test scores).

While the curriculum-first stance offers alignment with curricular and assessment foci, it can also inadvertently reinforce a narrow view of reading and writing by privileging white-centric texts, suggesting a modern manifestation of the doctrines of discovery, wherein curriculum standards are employed to assert the dominance of white settler colonialist narratives. The pointed questioning of a respondent in Dyches et al.’s (2021) study captures this institutional inertia:

Do we teach Huck Finn, for instance, because that’s what everybody else teaches across the country? Or do we teach Gatsby because that’s what seems like it’s always been done and the colleges are going to want to have us teach. I think too much of our curriculum is dictated by college expectations and, you know, those lists that the colleges and College Board and so on have always put together (p. 376).

By prioritizing texts with historical validation, the Curriculum-First stance operates as an intellectual territory of conquest. Just as the doctrines of discovery claimed lands by asserting the superiority and primacy of settler narratives, this curricular approach claims educational space by centering texts that reflect a narrow, predominantly white perspective. College expectations and standardized lists function as instruments of intellectual colonization, systematically erasing and delegitimizing literary works that challenge or diverge from established canons. Thus, Curriculum-First stances are prone to not only marginalizing diverse voices but also upholding a vision of literary excellence that aligns with the interests and perspectives of white supremacy culture, effectively allowing whiteness to claim superiority in the educational domain. As a result, this stance can become a mechanism for intellectual territorialization, where the curriculum plants its flag in the literacy classroom and displaces the stories of all others.

The law-abiding stance does not require a formalized body to sign off on the appropriate curriculum. Instead, this stance “presumes the meanings of texts and images are fixed and could influence readers to behave inappropriately” (Dávila 2022, 382). In other words, this text selection stance aims to regulate literary content to ensure that young people adhere to societal norms and do not behave in ways considered deviant or inappropriate. The law-abiding stance is particularly prevalent in how urban fiction—a genre of Black literature that often addresses complex and controversial subjects like, “incarceration, abortion, crime, drugs, teen parenthood, pregnancy, premarital sex, murder, violence, and abuse” (Gibson 2010, 567)—is scrutinized.

For instance, Marcelle Haddix's case study found that preservice teachers in an English Language Arts (ELA) methods course raised concerns about the potential negative influence of *Push*, worrying it might lead students to emulate “broken English” and “poor English skills” (Haddix and Price-Dennis 2013, 262). In contrast, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which also features less challenging vocabulary, was praised for being more accessible and appropriate. The selective scrutiny, which resulted in labels of brokenness and deviancy for the Blackcentric text, reflects a broader ideological bias. Just as the doctrines of discovery were used to justify the control and regulation of land and people, the law-abiding stance regulates literature to control whose stories and methods of storytelling are considered normative and approachable. By determining which stories are deemed lawful or not, this stance mirrors the colonialist mindset of defining acceptable behavior and narratives and choosing who is allowed to deviate from this norm. In this case, Black language deviations are unlawful, providing the legal and moral justification necessary to exclude Black language and literature from the classroom setting. It effectively aims to erase certain texts under the guise of protecting (white) readers from potential moral corruption.

4.2 | Text Selection as Logics of Elimination

Other significant stances, like Personal Exemption and Teach-What-You-Know, prioritize a teacher's personal knowledge, professional experience, familiarity, and/or comfortability with texts as central to text selection decisions (Applebee 1993; Dávila and Barnes 2017; Friese et al. 2008; Heartling Thein

and Beach 2013; Liang et al. 2024; Sarigianides and Borsheim-Black 2022). Darragh and Boyd's (2019) study, for instance, showed that veteran teachers often selected texts based on their personal preferences, with statements like: “If I don't like a book, I replace it with one that I do like,” “If I don't like it, my students won't either,” and “I don't teach anything that I don't like” (p. 69). Similarly, Stallworth et al. (2011) found that teachers favored canonical texts because they lacked knowledge of literature written by non-white authors. Some teachers said they did not teach diverse literature because they lacked exposure to “non-European authors” or did not believe there to be any non-white authors who “would be appropriate for a ninth-grade audience” (pp. 485–486). While many educators wield significant autonomy in text selection, these stances often prioritize personal comfort, expertise, and values over the diverse needs of students. When teachers choose texts based on their own preferences or comfort zones, they limit students' exposure to a broad range of perspectives. This tendency can perpetuate a curriculum dominated by familiar, often homogeneous texts, reinforcing existing biases and diminishing students' literary experiences.

While it is important for teachers to find joy in the books they teach, these stances present the logics of elimination via assimilation and resocialization. Assimilation occurs when educators select texts that align with their personal preferences and cultural comfort zones, thereby promoting a homogenized curriculum that often reflects dominant, European cultural values. This text selection process subsumes minoritized perspectives into a singular, often Eurocentric, worldview. Resocialization is possible if students internalize these limited cultural norms and values, as the curriculum predominantly features familiar, canonical texts that reinforce existing biases and marginalize alternative viewpoints. Through these stances, the curriculum has the potential to become a tool for perpetuating cultural and literary hierarchies and limiting students' exposure to a diverse array of stories, perspectives, and experiences.

The tried-and-true stance is characterized using established rationales for text selection. For example, educators often use quantitative approaches, where educators use data-driven measures (e.g., degrees of reading power, Lexile scores, Flesch-Kincaid formula, fry readability graph) to assess a text's complexity and match the texts to students based on grade-level reading bands. These methods have a long history in ELA classrooms (Archer 2011; Fang and Pace 2013; Gutierrez de Blume et al. 2021; Hodgkinson and Small 2018; Lupo et al. 2019; Reed and Kershaw-Herrera 2016; Sheehan 2017). As an example, Lammert et al. (2024) aimed to study how preservice teachers understand text complexity and how they use that knowledge to make text selections. In their findings, one student said “It is still hard finding reading books within their level, within their interests, and that have the right teaching content...I think this will come easier once I have much more experience in it, but it is hard work making sure the books check every box” (p. 12). The student's use of quantitative measures reveals both the promise and limitations of the Tried-and-True stance. While these data-driven approaches provide a structured framework for text selection, they often reduce the rich, complex process of literary engagement to a set of numeric parameters. Quantitative measures have their place, but an overemphasis on numerical data

can overshadow important qualitative aspects in text selection, such as student interest, student choice, and communal/cultural resonance. Furthermore, over-emphasizing a quantitative approach implies that text selection is purely objective, a box to check rather than an intricate process, thereby overlooking the nuanced and subjective aspects contributing to meaningful literary engagement (Fisher et al. 2012).

Additionally, the tried-and-true stance often draws on institutional histories standardized in departmental policies, which can lead educators to favor texts with established instructional grounding within the school or district (Brown et al. 2014; Boyd and Darragh 2019; Glaws 2021; Rios 2024; Rush et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2018; Wollman-Bonilla 1998). As an example, in Nam's (2023) study, a teacher of color noted that district-mandated reliance on canonical texts inhibited their text selections:

I get the desire to make sure they are at least passingly familiar with the classics. However, I teach on level English III. Just getting them to read at all is hard enough, let alone the dense, archaic speech of many of the 19th century authors that make up our reading list. I have so many kids who think they hate reading and I think they just haven't found the right books. I want to make the threshold for entry a bit lower, with at least a couple of titles and see if I can't hook some new readers, even in the 11th grade (p. 11).

Here, the speaker exposes the logics of elimination inherent in institutional text selection. When curriculum requirements privilege canonical texts over texts that connect with students' lived experiences, they enact a form of literary colonization. The mandated reading list systematically replaces texts that might reflect diverse perspectives with those that center dominant cultural narratives. It effectively eliminates opportunities for marginalized students to see themselves in literature while substituting a curriculum that reinforces established hierarchies. Even as the teacher desires to bring in diverse texts, the framing of "lowering the threshold" problematically suggests that diverse texts lack rigor, inadvertently perpetuating the false dichotomy that texts must either be canonical and challenging or accessible and culturally relevant. In this way, the teacher's perspective enacts a logic of elimination by implying that culturally diverse literature cannot meet high academic standards, thereby reinforcing the very hierarchies the teacher wants to resist.

4.3 | Text Selection as Settler-Native-Slave Triad

Many teachers try to prioritize texts that resonate with students' interests, cultures, communities, and lives (Allred and Cena 2020; Dredger 2008; Falkner 2011; Nam 2023), but several stances (i.e., universalist, NIMBY, and protection) presume an ideal student, one who is "a white U.S. citizen of European ancestry, middle class, heterosexual, and able-bodied" (Sulzer and Thein 2016, 166; Thein 2013). The protection stance, for instance, is used to preserve white students' innocence by omitting texts that contain elements considered too mature for them

(including "controversial topics" like race, sexuality, and ethnicity). In contrast, the universalist and NIMBY stances often seek to safeguard white students' feelings by focusing on common themes and minimizing racial differences. As examples, In Ketter and Lewis' (2001) study, one teacher remarked:

I'm struck by the themes of these stories and [in] many that we've read... they're really more than ethnically oriented, they're just, like, oriented, and they're just common experiences that people have forever and it's like taking that experience and putting it in different setting and think the universality of human experience is an important thing for students to understand (pp. 178–179).

Similarly, Sulzer and Thein (2016) highlighted a teacher who believed *American Born Chinese* would help readers to understand the lives of racial minorities: "Students will find Jin relatable, and therefore, be able to view him as someone like them, even though he may be from a different race, which may cause them to modify their views of Asian people and other racial minorities" (p. 166). Both examples reflect a color-evasive strategy in which the experiences of students of color are obscured to appeal to white students. Because the experiences of Black students and other students of color might be uncomfortable or uncommon to white students, they are deliberately omitted, but focusing on presumed commonalities or avoiding uncomfortable subjects (especially when the discomfort is connected to the diverse realities of students' lives) marginalizes students who do not fit the idealized mold. Here, the settler-native-slave triad is clear: the settler is the ideal student whose interests and needs are privileged and prioritized; the native refers to the stories that must be obliterated to bring the "pre-modern" into "civilized" society; the slave is the nonhuman and non-ideal thing that must be subsumed into whiteness for commonality to be reached. Although the stances are used to "protect" students, they are also tools to reinforce the settler colonial order by upholding power imbalances and entitlements, where some students and stories are valued, and others are not.

Lastly, while Dávila (2022) recognizes that all of these stances are methods of risk aversion, the current sociocultural climate—marked by a rise in antiblack, Eurocentric movements and right-wing efforts to restrict school reading materials—has heightened educators' risk aversion due to genuine fears of backlash from parents, school boards, and political pundits (Appleman 2022; Natanson 2023; Walter and Boyd 2019; Williams 2022). Stories of teachers being fired or suspended for teaching texts on race, gender, and sexuality abound (Green 2021; Kaonga 2022). Libraries in various states are reported to have empty shelves as librarians and administrators adhere to arbitrary criteria that ignore student identities (Tolin 2023; Windes 2022). Additionally, school board meetings feature racist, homophobic, and xenophobic comments where right-wing board members and parents criticize texts featuring people minoritized by the white supremacist and patriarchal system in the United States (Miller 2021; Nierenberg 2021). The prevalence of these conditions has led teachers to

over-interpret anti-diversity, anti-equity, and to-inclusion policies, avoiding discussions and texts on race and racism even when students bring up these topics. As one teacher in Kelly and Taylor's (2024) study noted:

Let's say my kids—which they do, because they're little Black kids in America—have a situation where they're made to feel uncomfortable, and it may have to do with their race. Now we can't talk about these kid's experiences. We can't help them cope with how they're feeling and what they're dealing with (p. 182).

While these fears are legitimate, such restrictions threaten to silence crucial discussions about white supremacy and antiblackness communicated through “historical facts, current events, complex opportunity barriers, [and] real biases,” thereby limiting the voices of minoritized communities and stifling potential collective improvements in our schools and society (Pollock et al. 2022, vii). By avoiding potentially contentious texts, educators inadvertently contribute to a cycle of censorship that compromises the quality of education and the inclusive, reflective learning environments necessary for addressing systemic inequalities. Again, the settler-native-slave triad is realized through this stance, as the stories of those deemed native and slave are presumed illegal for fear of white retaliation. The censorship based in fear perpetuates a cycle in which white children benefit from the marginalization of Indigenous/native ideas and stories and the criminalization of Black life.

Dávila's (2022) descriptions suggest that the various stances educators assume in selecting texts are far from purely academic; they are fundamental mechanisms through which the stories of people, culture, history, and futurity are shaped and delivered. As Apple (1990) observed, stances toward text selection frequently represent broader struggles over power and authority and highlight controversies over what constitutes official knowledge. Whatever stance educators adopt reflects underlying values and social norms that not only determine what students read but also influence how they interpret and relate to the world, how they understand or overlook different perspectives and cultures, and how they view themselves and their communities. Each stance carries implications for the inclusivity of curricula, the representation of diverse voices, and the reinforcement or challenge of prevailing power structures. Each stance takes a position about what knowledge is deemed worthy of inclusion in the educational landscape and what knowledge is marginalized. Essentially, each stance acts as a technology that shapes whose ways of knowing are validated and preserved, whose stories are obliterated and criminalized, and whose stories are allowed space in the future. By influencing which stories are told and which are erased, these stances not only reflect but also actively construct the ideological and material conditions that will define the future.

5 | Syncretic Spacetime: Afrofuturism as a Framework for Liberatory Text Selection

Considering the power of colonialist technologies in shaping educational canons and knowledge systems, I turn to

Afrofuturism as a compelling framework for rethinking and reframing text selection stances. Afrofuturism is a multifaceted cultural and intellectual movement that uses science fiction and other artistic forms to explore and reclaim Black histories, challenge oppressive narratives, and envision future possibilities at the intersection of race, technology, and space (Toliver 2020; Morris 2016; Nelson 2002; Womack 2013; Yaszek 2013). Because Afrofuturism “functions as both a theoretical discourse on issues such as identity construction [and] a politicized aesthetic movement that seeks to call into question and reorder relations of privilege and power” (McCormack 2016, 11), it can serve as both a method for classifying literary texts and a lens for examining ideas of power, identity, and liberation across time. The dual function of the framework makes Afrofuturism particularly valuable for educators seeking to transform text selection practices. As an aesthetic movement, Afrofuturism offers a way to redefine traditional practices and challenge entrenched paradigms through the integration of speculative elements, envisionments of otherwise worlds, alternative practices, and imaginative possibilities. As a theoretical approach, it offers an onto-epistemological frame that centers Black ways of knowing and emphasizes realities in which a brazen love for Black joy, Black celebration, and the whole of Black life are not only possible but required.

Central to understanding Afrofuturism as a technology for liberation is recognizing how Blackness itself functions as its power source. As Smith (2023b) argued, the differentiation between Eurocentric and Afrocentric thought can be expressed as looking inward versus looking outward for the most advanced technologies and answers concerning the universe and our future (p. 10). That is, unlike deficit-oriented perspectives that view Blackness through a white gaze, Afrofuturism draws its energy from Black culture, consciousness, and identity as defined by Black people. It harnesses the creative, intellectual, and spiritual resources of Black communities to envision worlds where Black flourishing is not only possible but inevitable. The power of Afrofuturist technologies, then, stems from their rootedness in Black epistemologies that resist colonial narratives and thus potentially resets us to a qualitatively different understanding of humanity, to break free from narratives embedded in the controlling frameworks of Western institutions (Mutere 2023). While colonialism operates as an imperial force of white supremacy that seeks to erase, minimize, or appropriate Black cultural production, Afrofuturism counters by centering Blackness as a generative, innovative, and self-defining power that refuses erasure and insists on Black futures.

The application of Afrofuturist principles to text selection practices creates opportunities for a more liberatory literacy education because the ideas directly support and extend critical literacy scholars' calls for equitable text selection practices. For instance, Alfred Tatum's (2019) argument is that text selection “is more than giving all students what they need, but rather giving all students what they deserve and what they can yet imagine to protect themselves and their posterity” to disrupt the education chasm “between those who flourish and those who wither as a result of the texts they experience or do not experience in schools” (p. 475). Considering that Black students and other students of color are those most likely to wither in an antiblack educational system (Dumas and

Ross 2016; Kohli et al. 2017), text selection practices must evaluate how power might be redistributed toward those students, so withering is impossible. Further, in an education system in which text selection for Black literature is consistently framed by the traumatic past or the violent present (Toliver 2018; Thomas 2016), Afrofuturist text selection demands a reorientation to what stories are given place and space in the ELA classroom as well as how these texts might shape the collective future. Afrofuturism provides a concrete methodology for realizing this vision because it intentionally emphasizes texts that traverse temporal boundaries in an effort to reclaim histories, envision liberated futures, and insist on Black life.

Muhammad (2019) also advocated for selecting texts that “ignite social change while also helping to shape students’ identities and perspectives in the world” (p. 351), proposing an equity-centered approach that addresses lesson design, textual layering, and socio-political analysis. An earlier study by Christ and Sharma (2018) supported these ideas. Explicitly, they recommended the use of culturally relevant text selection that prioritized a deep commitment to students’ personal and social identities, cultures, and histories and a strong understanding of instructional strategies that can assist in the development of youth’s critical consciousness. These pedagogical priorities align seamlessly with Afrofuturist principles, creating a natural bridge between critical literacy scholarship and Afrofuturist practice. Both studies, which center student identity while building their criticality, parallels Afrofuturism’s insistence on challenging dominant narratives and reimagining power structures. Moreover, suggesting that teachers employ various instructional strategies in the teaching of multiple texts is inherent to Afrofuturist practice, which frequently and deliberately blends genres, modalities, and temporalities to create complex narratives.

When viewed through an Afrofuturist lens, text selection becomes a revolutionary act. Anti-oppressive and liberatory text selection practices urge educators to choose texts aimed toward the dismantling of oppressive textual practices, the reorganization of power through textual representation, the building of youth’s critical orientations, and the development of teachers who are willing, able, and adept in utilizing interdisciplinary, cross-genre, and multi-era texts that assist young people in ruminating on the past and present in hopes of creating a more equitable future (Holloway and Greig 2011; Hunt 2023; Sharma and Crist 2017; Watkins and Ostenson 2015). They also draw attention to the fact that text selection is more than just what books are selected. It includes how the texts are taught; how educators find connections within, across, and between various texts; and how educators assist students in utilizing textual learning toward specific personal, communal, and educational social justice goals (Hunt 2023; Stephens et al. 2023). As text selection is always political and always about power, embracing Afrofuturist text selection practices becomes a critical strategy for engaging in anti-oppressive text selection that allows for the dismantling of whiteness that undergirds ELA classrooms and the upliftment of pedagogical practices that enable students to not only dream of but create anti-racist, inclusive futures.

The theoretical and methodological possibilities of Afrofuturism support anti-racist and liberatory text selection, especially as Afrofuturism encourages educators to centralize Black ways of

being, knowing, and doing in the ELA classroom (Carey 2020; Grue 2020). It presents a paradigm shift in how texts are selected, taught, and engaged with in educational settings. Of course, centralizing Black onto-epistemologies does not mean engaging in anti-white “or anti-anything else [practices]... [Instead, it is a way] to ensure that Black children across the world are loved and safe and that their souls and spirits are healed from the ongoing damage of living in a world in which white supremacy flourishes” (Boutte et al. 2021, xv). In other words, emphasizing Afrofuturism ensures a commitment against the relegation of Black youth as those who wither and toward the proliferation of classroom spaces in which teachers have the willingness and ability to engage in the creation of curriculum and instruction that supports Black youth in employing social justice tactics, developing their personal, communal, and social identities, and fostering their critical consciousness to flourish within and beyond a white supremacist world. It assists in the creation of learning environments where Black students see themselves not just as survivors of antiblackness but as architects of Blackcentric futures. Anti-oppressive and liberatory text selection practices require educators to disrupt, imagine, and create, and Afrofuturistic text selection practices lend themselves to this process. As text and theory, it makes space for educators to engage in critical text selection procedures and consider their orientations toward teaching in ways that promote Black futurity.

6 | Redistributing Power: Afrofuturist Technologies at Work

While scholars have yet to define specific stances on Afrofuturist text selection, Lavender (2019) proposed that “any practical knowledge that helps Black people address problems in their environment and society, facilitating their escape from physical and psychological bondage and enabling them to control their own actions, qualifies as a freedom technology” (p. 26). This broad definition allows for the inclusion of various forms of practical knowledge, such as literacies, spirit, imagination, creativity, and hope, as Afrofuturist technologies for achieving freedom. Categorizing each potential freedom technology is beyond the scope of this paper, but Lavender (2019) acknowledged three underlying concepts that guide all Afrofuturist freedom technologies: the transhistorical feedback loop, the hope impulse, and the Black networked consciousness. His guiding concepts offer potential avenues for categorizing the possibility of Afrofuturist text selection as a freedom technology, especially as it presents text selection to reach back, reach outside, and reach beyond the machinations of white settler futurity.

6.1 | Text Selection as Transhistorical Feedback Loop

The technologies associated with white settler futurity are designed to control access to time. As Nanni (2012) argued, “European colonial expansion, during which projects to eliminate, subsume, and reform—and thus in effect ‘colonize’ – alternative cultures of time were first deployed by European societies as a means of establishing control over other lands and peoples” (p. 1). With this power, colonists could define

the past, present, and future, rendering the histories of minoritized people inconsequential. Such insignificant histories could be easily rewritten, facilitating the construction of revisionist narratives that promote a white settler colonial future (e.g., enslaved Africans came to the Americas to work). In contrast, Afrofuturist technologies emphasize reconnecting with the past and remembering erased histories to understand their impact on the future. Specifically, the transhistorical feedback loop exceeds traditional conceptions of time, preserving history across eras and challenging the notion that knowledge is confined within historical contexts. Because the past, present, and future always influence each other, eras of time do not constrict the knowledge that people can take with them. The collective memory, held within the universe, is passed down to descendants, ensuring that connectivity endures despite colonial interruption and deliberate misinterpretation.

As an Afrofuturist technology, the transhistorical feedback loop is uniquely positioned to serve as a tool of decolonization that actively thwarts the doctrines of discovery, which enabled conquest, seizure, imprisonment, and enslavement. The feedback loop makes space for people to reclaim and honor erased histories, thereby undermining the linear progress often implied by colonial doctrines, strengthening Indigenous and minoritized ways of knowing, and envisioning futures unbound by colonial control. Specifically, the continuous loop reinforces the vital relationship with history, ensuring that the wisdom, struggles, and triumphs of ancestors remain integral to the identity and future of those who come after (Lavan 2022; Streeby 2014). By honoring past experiences and ancestral knowledge, the loop supports the idea that histories are vital for understanding the present and future, allowing people to draw strength from their heritage in the face of ongoing colonialist violence (Reed and Lohnes 2019; Springgay and Truman 2019). In (re)connecting with the past, descendants can reexamine and disrupt triumphalist narratives of colonialism. They can also use this feedback loop to showcase their diverse onto-epistemological locations, dismantling hierarchies that argue for the predominance of colonialist realities (Harrington et al. 2022; Player et al. 2020). Ultimately, the transhistorical feedback loop highlights how Black people have historically navigated and created disruptions in space-time, maintaining connections to the past and acknowledging how Black elders and ancestors critiqued racial injustice and envisioned alternative futures.

Considering the transhistorical feedback loop as a text selection stance invites educators to explore the connections between past, present, and future struggles against racial injustice. By acknowledging how different eras have critiqued and envisioned alternatives to the status quo, educators can help students recognize the continuity of resistance and the importance of learning from historical movements. Texts that exemplify the transhistorical feedback loop provide readers with the context and inspiration to engage in contemporary activism and envision transformative futures. Toward these aims, educators might ask themselves questions like:

1. How does the text reflect the interconnectedness of past and present struggles against racial injustice?

2. In what ways might the text prompt students to draw parallels between historical movements and contemporary issues?
3. Does this text enable students to reexamine colonialist narratives?
4. How does this text ensure that students can (re)connect to indigenous and/or ancestral knowledge?
5. How do representations of resistance in the text empower students to engage in activism today?

While there are other potential questions educators might ask, these inquiries can serve as a foundational framework for employing text selection through the lens of the transhistorical feedback loop. Centering these and other questions can assist educators in nurturing a sense of historical interconnectedness that might inspire a generation of readers who are deeply rooted in their heritage, yet forward-looking in their aspirations for social change.

6.2 | Text Selection as Hope Impulse

Even though the technology of white settler futurity demands murder, violence, and death (Canham 2021; Griffin and Turner 2021; Love 2019), Afrofuturist technologies are grounded in hope, optimism, and life, a desire and expectation for flourishing futures that transcend mere survival. The hope impulse, expanded by an anticolonial vision, invites communities to imagine and create liberatory worlds. It refers to the essential drive for a better life which fuels resistance and rebellion and challenges white colonialist ideologies (Lavender 2016). Of course, this hope is not without complexity and nuance, as it requires “rationality, education, history, and persistence” (Grant 2020, 66). As bell hooks (2013) argued, hope “emerges from those places of struggle where [we] witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them” (p. 14). That is, hope does not materialize from thin air; it is born from adversity and is deeply linked to the realities of hardship and oppression. Hope is a radical act and revolutionary impulse, a refusal to accept the status quo, and a commitment to forging paths toward more just and vibrant futures.

While essential to building better futures, the hope impulse can also play an important role in dismantling the logics of elimination inherent in the technologies of white settler futurity. Specifically, the hope impulse requires people to envision and strive for inclusive and liberated futures that actively work against the erasure and marginalization colonialist ideologies propagate (Hamilton 2017; Holbert et al. 2020). Even when colonizers attempt to eliminate people's cultures, lands, and lives, the hope impulse enables the construction of new approaches, new lives, new worlds (Grant 2020; Jones and Howard 2021; Player et al. 2023; VerCetty 2022). Hope may not undo the struggles of the past or negate colonial elimination, but it can inspire the pursuit of otherwise futures and encourage life after forced destruction (Brown 2022; Noel 2022). The radical nature of this impulse lies in its ability to turn struggle into strength and oppression into opportunities for liberation, making it a powerful tool for social change.

As a stance toward text selection, the hope impulse encourages educators to choose texts that inspire readers to continuously envision and create better futures that celebrate and value Black life. It also urges teachers to select texts that might provide readers with a foundation upon which to build their desire to engage in resistive, rebellious, and subversive acts that might lead to a more pluralistic and liberatory future. For this reason, a hope impulse stance prioritizes texts that emphasize creativity, spiritedness, and innovation in hopes that readers might engage in unconventional and otherwise thinking toward worlds and futures in which all living things can live, love, and heal. Considering these aims, text selection as hope impulse might necessitate questions like the following:

1. Can this text encourage students to envision a world filled with possibilities and positive change?
2. Can students see their own dreams and aspirations reflected in this text?
3. Can the material challenge students to think creatively and explore ideas beyond colonialist norms?
4. Is there an emphasis on hopeful outcomes or innovative solutions that inspire students to believe in their ability to create a better future?
5. Does this text suggest the possibility of coexistent futures?

By addressing these critical questions, educators can thoughtfully curate texts that not only foster hope, creativity, and imagination but also equip students with the intellectual tools needed to actively engage in and contribute to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive future.

6.3 | Text Selection as Black Networked Consciousness

A key component of white settler futurity is isolation, the ability to separate minoritized peoples from history, from hope, from each other. This forced separation ensures the futurity of oppression, as it maintains hierarchies of colonizer/colonized, human/subhuman, settler/native/slave, and solidifies a divide and rule imperative in which minoritized communities are fragmented and weakened. Isolation, as a strategy, seeks to erase cultural memory and stifle the potential for solidarity and collective resistance. When people are cut off from each other, it limits the formation of alliances that are critical for challenging white supremacy. The Black networked consciousness, however, represents a webbed network undergirded by communal love that fuels the ongoing fight for equity and justice (Eshun 2003; Lavender 2019). It considers Black people as individual nodules within a larger interconnected system that stores memory, contemporality, resilience, joy, struggle, and possibility in hopes that these elements might foster pluralistic liberatory futures. As Audre Lorde (1984) argued, “We share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable... freedom [can’t] belong to any one group of us without the others also being free” (par. 141). In other words, true liberation cannot be achieved in a vacuum; instead, it demands collective struggle and solidarity across diverse communities. In this way, the

Black networked consciousness crosses geographical, temporal, social, and cultural boundaries and acts as a binding agent that enables people to work collaboratively toward common goals.

Due to its commitment to solidarity across and despite struggle, the networked consciousness can dismember the settler-native-slave triad. Specifically, the triad demands the upliftment of colonialist hierarchies aimed at separating peoples from each other, but the networked consciousness creates opportunities for alliances within and across groups minoritized through colonial dominance structures. Just as Black people are individual nodes in the system, so, too, are other groups that have experienced oppression within a white settler colonialist system. As the collective lights up the circuit, the connected nodes counteract the divisions and dismantle the hierarchies inherent in colonialist systems. In fact, as a system of interconnected cultural memory (Bould 2019), the network prompts the creation of new forms of resistance facilitated from the dialogue among communities. It dismantles “European patriarchal, masculinist, militaristic, and toxic racism from our future” and, instead, pursues a spirit of “peace, harmony, consensus, justice, and reciprocity” (Asante 2023, 179). Each connected node shares information with the others, fostering a greater understanding of the legacies and impacts of each group. As these nodes connect, they electrify the pulse of minoritized voices, disrupting the technologies of colonialist isolation. The whole becomes stronger through intra- and inter-group responsibility.

Considering the Black networked consciousness as a stance to text selection encourages educators to choose texts that reflect and nurture a sense of solidarity and collective struggle for equity and justice. It also emboldens teachers to select works that highlight the connection among people minoritized in a white supremacist system. Toward these aims, taking this stance might lead educators to ask the following questions:

1. How do these texts illustrate the struggles and resistances of various minoritized groups?
2. How can the stories represented in these texts foster collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds?
3. In what ways might this text help students see themselves as nodes in a larger communal network?
4. In what ways can this text inspire actionable solidarity, motivating students to engage in collective efforts for social change?
5. How might these texts help students to use each other’s differences in our common battles for a livable future (Lorde 1988)?

These questions prompt students to engage with texts and consider how individual and collective identities are shaped by shared struggles. By exploring these connections, young people might recognize the importance of collaboration in the fight against systemic oppression.

7 | Reclaiming Spacetime From Book Bans

There are many factors influencing teachers’ approach to text selection, but power dynamics are always at play. Power can

reside with departments, school districts, and school boards; with parents and community members; or with teachers themselves, who may draw on personal knowledge or preferences. As Apple (1990) argued decades ago, power is always a factor, as text selection signifies “someone’s selection, someone’s vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group’s cultural capital disenfranchises another’s” (p. 20). When certain groups are disenfranchised, it becomes easier to validate their marginalization, erasure, and the systemic violence inflicted upon them. In this case, the violence is enacted through the elimination of certain texts, certain ideas, and certain histories and futures from classrooms (Jones 2022). Thus, a consistent obstacle in text selection is the way colonialism and white supremacy often dominate, positioning themselves as the standard for legitimate knowledge while sidelining the knowledge of minoritized others, especially those who are racialized as Black.

In an era marked by increasing attempts to censor literature and restrict access to diverse narratives, the concept of reclaiming spacetime becomes essential for resistance. As Said (1993) articulated, narrative and story have critical roles in the colonialist quest for domination because stories (true or not) shape our perceptions, aspirations, and spatiotemporal locations. Because they shape what we see and believe, the colonial project relies heavily on controlling global narratives and suppressing alternative stories. These habitual colonized patterns of perception can make us—educators, students, parents, administrators, and policy makers—believe that the status quo is inevitable or natural, that the existing conditions are the best possible outcomes in an imperfect world, and that any alternative visions of reality should be dismissed as extreme, unbelievable, or divisive (Delgado 1989). Ultimately, colonialism seeks to regulate the global story to maintain its dominance and legitimacy and preserve its hold on spacetime, ensuring that people “will continue to struggle in the present to see themselves other than through the eyes of their open enemies” (Smith 2023a, 66). It aims to embed oppressive logics into the structural foundation of society by creating fantasies, superstitions, and science fictions about the people who are minoritized in a colonialist system.

However, while texts can be wielded to manipulate our understandings of space, time, history, and culture, they can also serve as powerful tools to disrupt Eurocentric domination. Stories can foster novel perspectives, perceptions, understandings, and expressions by dismantling universalist ideas, freeing minoritized peoples from the grip of dominant stories (Joseph 2024; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Beyond merely responding to colonialist narratives, they offer ways to imagine worlds anew and engage in an anticolonial praxis. In this context, “storytelling genealogies and practices become forces of possibility, altering and disrupting the racial-colonial-heteropatriarchal manipulations of scale, space, land, and power” (Vasudevan et al. 2022, 1731). Thus, the texts we choose to center not only convey meaning and evoke emotion, but they can also help us to make place, make home, make community, make self (Christian 1987; McKittrick 2021). In this way, text selection is not merely an act of choosing which texts can help us teach which literary techniques; rather, it is a way to potentially combat colonialism by creating a culture in which students can locate themselves,

foster community and solidarity, preserve cultural heritage, and imagine new possibilities for our collective futures. It is a way of helping young people develop the tools to reclaim spacetime and build pluralistic futures in which everyone has a share in the global story.

In sharing this commitment to pluralism, I acknowledge that Afrofuturist text selection is but one possibility. As Chattopadhyay (2024) eloquently put it, confronting colonialism’s control demands that we embody all that colonialism is not.

This means recognizing our inherent interconnectedness and interrelatedness, eschewing all fallacious narratives of separation and otherization, rejecting the productization of every facet of life, and pathologizing all that makes us human—kindness, care, empathy, connection. This means untangling ourselves from hegemony-imposed notions of separation, hyper-individualism, endless consumption, and extreme fear of the unknown. This means escaping—even if occasionally—from hegemony’s narrow confines to weave other tales of togetherness. This means becoming conscious of all the tools in hegemony’s arsenal and refusing to be indoctrinated (para. 25).

So, as educators consider their text selection practices, I offer Afrofuturist text selection as one tool, one weapon, one storied possibility in our arsenal against colonial control.

By employing an Afrofuturist stance toward text selection, we might build our own networks of consciousness, coalitions of solidarity that deliberately connect across disciplinary boundaries, grade levels, school districts, and states. We might forge reading alliances with educators in other regions facing similar censorship challenges, sharing strategies for protecting access to texts that center Black futurity and imagination. We might create underground circuits for exchanging lesson plans and teaching materials that position Afrofuturist texts as essential rather than supplementary to the curriculum. We might document our text selection processes not merely as pedagogical choices but as political acts that contest the colonial control of knowledge and narrative and then share these documents with others engaged in parallel struggles.

Alternatively, we might leverage our individual and collective creative, rebellious, spirited, and subversive gifts to remember our own hope impulses, to make room for unconventional and seemingly impossible dreams of futures that are better for all of us. We might craft speculative narratives that reimagine our communities beyond oppressive structures, positioning our creative work as serious intellectual and political intervention. We might design classroom rituals that celebrate textual encounters with the impossible, the magical, the liberatory, creating spaces where hope is practiced as disciplined resistance against despair. We might deliberately select texts that refuse narrative closure or singular futures, instead modeling how multiple pathways toward freedom can coexist in our classrooms and communities.

Perhaps, we might help each other access the transhistorical feedback loop that connects us to those who have fought this battle before. We can read and connect to the words of education activists like Septima Poinsette Clark, Sylvia Mendez, Malala Yousafzai, Eunice Akoth, Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and so many others who have fought for a more liberatory education. We might create school or community archives that juxtapose historical resistance texts with contemporary Afrofuturist works to trace throughlines of liberation across time. We might engage in collective readings of banned texts from different eras, illuminating how the struggle against censorship transcends any single historical moment. We might curate literary timelines that reveal how Afrofuturist thought has always existed, even before the term itself, as a means of imagining freedom beyond colonial constraints of time and space.

I intentionally use “might” or “could” rather than demanding specific actions because an anticolonial lens necessitates sitting with fluidity and releasing authority. It demands an ethic of incommensurability. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argued:

To fully enact an ethic of incommensurability means relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples. It means removing the asterisks, periods, commas, apostrophes, the whereas's, buts, and conditional clauses that punctuate decolonization and underwrite settler innocence. The Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone—these are the unwritten possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability (p. 36)

This ethic of incommensurability directly informs the tentative nature of my suggestions. When I propose that educators “might build networks of consciousness” or “might leverage creative gifts,” I am deliberately refusing to colonize the future with rigid prescriptions. Each “might” creates space for educators to determine their own pathways of resistance based on their specific contexts and communities. In my conditional language, I acknowledge that no single approach to anticolonial text selection can or should be universalized.

Said another way: there is no one way to be anticolonial in a pluriversal existence. There are multiple possibilities, grounded in the lived experiences and equity-informed text selection practices of multiple people across, within, and at the intersections of various racial, gendered, ethnic locations. The various pathways I've suggested—building solidarity networks, creating underground circuits, crafting speculative narratives, accessing transhistorical connections—are not a comprehensive checklist but rather openings into what might be possible when we refuse colonial constraints on our imagination.

Of course, while there are some futures that cannot exist because they negate the existence of others, confronting colonial control means creating room in the universe for an expansive futurity. It means recognizing the possibility of multiple universes in which all people can experience hope, historical and ancestral connection, and cultural consciousness. The tentative nature of

my suggestions is not a weakness but a deliberate stance that honors this multiplicity and refuses to replicate colonial patterns of prescription and control.

8 | Reading Against the Empire: Beyond the Ban

Literacy and English education are deeply rooted in the history of war, empire, and colonialism, so our text selection choices cannot be separated from these histories. However, we can confront and refuse colonialist control of spacetime by choosing otherwise. We can choose texts that orient students toward hope, toward spirit and ancestry, toward each other. We can reclaim our power to select texts that honor the fullness of diverse identities and histories and resist the systems that seek to suppress them. Through our choices, we can invite students to envision themselves as active agents in the global narrative, capable of shaping futures where justice, equity, and cultural dignity are the foundational pillars. We can think of each text selection stance as an act of worldbuilding or world ending, a declaration of which realities we validate and which we reject, which futures we nurture and which we refuse to perpetuate. In doing so, we can participate in the ongoing struggle to reclaim spacetime, making space for the stories that have been erased, making time for the futures we are yet to imagine.

As book bans proliferate and educational freedom narrows, textual plurality is crucial because it provides an affirmation that the future of education will not be constrained by colonial imaginations but expanded through our collective literary resistance. Every text placed in a student's hands represents a choice: reinforce the colonizer's timeline or rupture it entirely. In this war over collective memory and imagination, over space and time, literacy educators stand as guardians of banned histories and architects of liberated futures. The struggle is not just about what students read, but about who controls the narrative of what is possible. Text selection, then, becomes the ultimate act of resistance, as each book becomes a weapon against the forces that would constrain education within the constricted boundaries of white settler futurity.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors for allowing me to contribute to this important special issue. I would also like to thank the reviewers for their time and intellectual labor.

Ethics Statement

The research adheres to ethical research guidelines but due to its identification as a meta-ethnography, IRB was not obtained. All reproduced material (i.e., quotes) have been accurately attributed to its original source.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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An asterisk (*) indicates an article reviewed for the meta-ethnography.

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