

# Reading Yourself Queer Later in Life: Bisexual Literacies, Temporal Fluidity, and the Teaching of Composition

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## KEYWORDS

bisexual literacies; later-in-life literacies; queer literacies;  
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**A**s a white cisgender woman who has long engaged with queer theory, but who did not experience same-sex attraction until my mid-30s, I have these past five years had a tenuous relationship with queer texts. Several years ago, I attended an Ally training for our entire composition program, the first LGBTQ-focused public space where I had to internally navigate the fact that others would not be reading me as queer—a shift in reading that was also new to me. I was in my late 30s, had been questioning my sexuality for about three years, and had only recently come out to myself as bisexual. The literacy practices surrounding me did not complicate a reading that I could be anything other than straight, as all the oral and written texts for the training—aimed to serve the traditionally-aged students at our college—seemed to assume that anyone who was not already out was attending in the role of a straight ally. At the end of the training, we were all given Ally cards. While the trainer acknowledged the problematic guarantees of safe spaces, we were asked to post these cards in our offices—a textual artifact that would indicate to others how they should read us. Obediently, I taped the Ally card on my office wall. I hated that card.

Each day that Ally card on my wall seemed to advertise and reinforce my perceived heterosexuality at a time when I was desperately wanting people to recognize the person I was becoming and the struggle I was experiencing as I tried to read/find myself in queer texts. Finally, I turned the card over to the side simply advertising our campus gender identity and sexual orientation center—a space I did not feel I could enter, as all the posters and images of that space featured traditionally-aged college students. Both sides of the card seemed to push me away yet provided me no place to go. Other everyday texts also became painful to read. Posters for the queer student union and LGBTQ young adult novels, while so crucial to the survival of queer youth, seemed to communicate that I had come out too late in life to “count” as queer unless I left my heteronormative family. And if there were similar texts intentionally designed for those of us experiencing sexual fluidity later in life, they were invisible to me.

In an effort to seek something besides youth-based texts, I began reading books focused on bisexuality. Yet to my dismay, all the texts I happened to read focused on exclusionary practices bisexuals face within queer spaces. Rather than being welcomed into queer communities, I learned

from these texts that bisexuals are often read with suspicion, accused of simply wanting to maintain heteronormative privilege. Eventually, I stopped reading. It seemed as though the queer theory that once nourished me no longer seemed to want me once I began identifying as bisexual. Instead, I needed texts that would both allow me to read myself as queer later in life and provide a positive, affirming description of bisexuality.

## When Queer Texts Fail

Many scholars on bisexuality, including Julia Serano and Kenji Yoshino, highlight the tenuous place that bisexuality has within queer theory and queer spaces. These scholars assert that bisexuality is often made invisible and erased. As such, I argue that bisexual literacy practices are also often similarly invisible and erased, making it challenging for those of us who read ourselves queer or bisexual later in life to begin navigating between shifting worlds and identities. As Yoshino clarifies, this erasure is not accidental but instead jointly supported by monosexuals (both straight and queer) who benefit from bisexuality's erasure; straight people continue to benefit from privileged (and supposedly stable) heteronormativity, and gay and lesbian people, according to Yoshino, "have a specific interest in guarding the stability of homosexuality" to defend their identity (362). Therefore, as Yoshino explains, "Bisexuality is . . . threatening to all monosexuals because it makes it impossible to prove a monosexual identity" (362), and thus the life-affirming possibility of bisexuality is intentionally dismissed. This active erasure of affirming bisexual literacy practices—combined with the overt literacy practices that ostracize bisexuals—was and continues to be mentally and emotionally harmful. As such, I believe we need more possibilities for bisexual reading and writing practices, both to affirm who we are and to help navigate the binaries that insist we deny part of our identities. In seeking these possibilities, I turn to scholars who write about bisexuality, as well as scholars who complicate and expose harmful binaries within queer rhetorics.

In *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, Eric Darnell Pritchard emphasizes that Black queers and other queer people of color are often expected to be—and therefore be read as—either Black *or* gay, but not both, due to the combined whiteness and normativity that pervades our society. Responding to this forced binary, Pritchard complicates literacy as a means of both survival and risk. Pritchard explains that while "literacy is . . . a way to create identity, critique discourses that deny the possibility of intersectional and complex personhoods, and create community" (21), "*literacy normativity* . . . refers to uses of literacy that inflict harm" (24), particularly for Black queers and others who are read as nonnormative in a racist, ableist, transphobic world. Pritchard's concept of literacy normativity, one fully rooted in the Black queer experience, has much to teach us all about the ways in which literacy harms and divides. In applying Pritchard's analysis to bisexuality, bisexual literacies might be erased because, to echo Pritchard, people are apparently supposed to identify as either queer or straight—an oversimplified binary that can harm those who identify as bisexual. Reading ourselves in ways that challenge and complicate this binary is therefore a crucial part of bisexual literacy practices.

In considering additional possibilities for queer literacies, I ask that we also consider bisexual survival and literacy in terms of age and sexual fluidity. While I recognize that some might perceive bisexual and later-in-life literacies as two distinct concepts, for me they are intricately intertwined. My attempts to engage in queer literacies was influenced not just by my sexuality, but also by my age. In their essay on aging and literacy, Hall and Harker implicitly address the concept of sexual fluidity in literacy, asking, “how do we encourage younger adults to consider literacy not as a static state of being . . . but as a tool for discovering who we can become over the course of our lifetime?” (152).

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Similarly, I argue, how do we honor the fact that older adults also create—and re-create—new literacy practices at each moment in life? Creating space for people to identify as queer throughout their lives—and to recognize sexual fluidity as an embodied literacy practice that challenges normativity—is, I argue,

also necessary for survival. Indeed, our literacy practices must allow space for continued identity negotiation (Cox) that “deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects” (Puar 121). Yet these fluid spaces are not always afforded, even within queer communities. When I finally came out to a queer friend, hoping to be validated—and therefore read—as queer, things went poorly. They laughed and used literacy to isolate me, saying, “Well, you’re not alone, there are blogs for this”—a traumatic experience that crystallized the pain of literacy normativity, left me struggling for survival, and communicated that while I might access written texts, the embodied support of a hoped-for queer community was not an option. Suddenly the reading of texts, the traditional literacy practices that had once sustained me, were no longer an available means of survival.

When even queer texts fail to sustain us, what options do we have for survival? How do we teach, how do we live, when we know that—particularly for students and teachers marginalized by a predominantly white, traditionally-aged, and otherwise normative university (my previous and current WPA contexts)—literacy and composition practices are often simultaneously a means of both survival and risk? In this essay, I interrogate how both bisexual and later-in-life literacies, which for me are intertwined, challenge normative reading practices and contribute to queer literacies. Because bisexual and later-in-life literacies are often made relatively invisible, in this article I explore more possibilities for engaging in these literacies—not to define them in restrictive ways, but to affirm their existence and unique contributions to queer literacy practices. In seeking additional possibilities for bisexual and later-in-life literacies, I weave together autoethnography with literacy scholarship. I intentionally turn to queer scholars of color and trans and disability studies scholars who critique exclusionary practices of mainstream queer theory—and who collectively embody how literacy, our reading of ourselves and our identities, can simultaneously be both painful and restorative. In keeping with this special issue’s call, I emphasize that considering age and bisexuality helps support the survival of those of us who reach out to queer communities and cannot find

validation or acceptance in queer texts. As such, I am writing this article in part for those of us who began experiencing queer attraction and orientation later in life *and* who could not always find solace in the reading of queer texts. Throughout the essay, I ask how our reading and writing practices, both within and outside of the classroom, might encourage continuous possibilities for queer literacies and identity exploration for both individual and mutual survival.

## Challenging Normative Literacies

My teen years were nonnormative in ways that had nothing to do with sexuality. I attended school only through the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when my mother, who herself had only a high school diploma, took us out of school to begin homeschooling us. After she got sick, my job was to teach my six younger siblings to read and write. Our mother died when I was 15, and soon after, my job became protecting my siblings from the mental and emotional abuse of our new stepmother. Books were my safe space. I did not turn to them to validate my experiences, but to escape. Because I did not attend (or finish) middle school or high school, I was never around my peers, and I literally had zero examples or knowledge of queer identities until I started taking classes at our local community college. There were, as Sara Ahmed would say, no queer lines to orient toward. Because of the literacy practices available to me, heterosexuality was indeed compulsory. Once I started questioning my sexuality, I turned to books to make sense of my shifting identity . . . and found only emptiness. Now, books are no longer my safe space.

In the literature review that follows, I highlight the potential harm of literacy, including invisibility, erasure, and the denial of pre-existing knowledges. Here I also present possibilities for challenging normative literacies, approaches that frame my later discussion of bisexual and later-in-life literacies. As several examples from this and later sections come from scholars of color and Indigenous scholars, I emphasize that I do not seek to equate bisexual erasure, for example, with other forms of historical and racialized erasure. Instead, I foreground these approaches to challenging normative literacies because my training in cultural studies emphasizes intersectional responses to oppression (Crenshaw). On a more personal note, I was reading many of these texts while questioning my sexuality. As such, my understanding of the possibilities of bisexual and later-in-life literacies begins with these texts, their critiques of oppressive literacy practices, and the radical possibilities they provide for literacies that affirm the self. I owe much to these texts and authors, and while I draw from their knowledge in exploring bisexual literacy practices, I acknowledge that, as a white cisgender woman, I am also complicit in some of the practices they critique. As I discuss later, I believe that bisexual literacies can foreground the tension between inhabiting spaces in both the center and the margins, and as such I intentionally begin by reviewing texts that both challenge my own positionality and provide me with possibilities for survival.

Commonplace beliefs about literacy frame reading and writing as unquestionably beneficial, a belief I used to hold. The assumption of early literacy acquisition, close reading of texts, and writing to join a scholarly conversation all shape dominant perceptions and practices of literacy, particularly within the discipline of composition. Indeed, our very field depends on promoting the

benefits of a particular form of reading and writing. As such, composition programs and teachers, particularly those unfamiliar with critical literacies, can find it challenging to question the role of the literacy practices so central to our work. Within literacy studies, however, scholars often paint a more complicated picture of literacy, critiques that can also help us better understand the complexity of acquiring bisexual literacies, particularly later in life. In their introduction to *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose emphasize how “literacy is webbed in social structure, and thus the power relations, tensions, and inequities that characterize social, political, and institutional life will play out in literacy use as well” (12). These power relations and inequities, I am learning, also shape who benefits from literacy. As literacy scholars such as Deborah Brandt and Paulo Freire emphasize, literacy can be influenced primarily for the economic benefit of the sponsor or oppressor, rather than for the inherent benefit of the learner. As I began reading bisexual-focused texts that contested exclusionary practices against bisexuals (e.g., Anderlini-D’Onofrio; Eisner; Serano), I both deeply understood why such resistance was necessary—we were being actively erased and dismissed, even within queer communities—and was saddened by the need to justify one’s existence, particularly within a community that was supposed to be inclusive. I felt, at times, that I was learning less about bisexuality, including what that identity might encompass for me, and instead learning more about how to defend bisexuality. The written conversation was, as Brandt and Freire might suggest, addressing the needs of an outside audience rather than a way for me to learn about a hoped-for new community—a form of literacy-based harm that I believe contributes to bisexual erasure.

Scholars outside of the traditional boundaries of literacy studies also question the ways in which literacy can be used to harm. Indigenous research methodologies scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith of the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou peoples emphasizes how written alphabetic texts, literacies, and writing practices were—and continue to be—used as a means of colonization. In speaking about the dangers of reading and writing in colonial languages, Smith stresses that for Indigenous peoples, “Much of what I have read has said that we do not exist” (36), a shattering of the dominant commonplace that assumes literacy to be the great equalizer. While maintaining that oral literacies have long connected Indigenous peoples to native languages, lands, and histories, Smith wrestles with the contradiction written literacy poses, specifically when based in a colonial language. Smith argues that reading and writing can be important means of reclaiming native stories and theories, yet these literacy practices of reading and “Writing can also be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of discourse which is never innocent” (37). As I explore bisexual literacy practices, I am cognizant of the fact that even our stories of reclaiming can still reinforce a dangerous discourse.

Within composition, critical literacy scholars also critique how dominant and normative literacies erase students’ pre-existing knowledges, rhetorics, and languages. In *African American Literacies*, Elaine Richardson emphasizes how dominant white reading and writing practices negate the existing literacy experiences of Black students, arguing that “for African Americans the mere act of reading and writing has historically and literally been a political act” (96). Building on Richardson’s work, Pritchard highlights how the literacy practices of Black LGBTQ people reject “the role of literacy normativity in creating and maintaining a dominant culture that renders the Black

queer an invisible subject in literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies” (15). Yet Pritchard also emphasizes the potential for restorative literacies. Pritchard illustrates how Black queer subjects are reclaiming harmful literacy practices in ways that allow for the “practice [of] self- and communal love” (33), while simultaneously rejecting the racism and normativity embedded within society. These counternarratives (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman) to the dominant trope of literacy are not simply “beneficial” to classroom pedagogies, but are essential foundations for any literacy-based course—and potentially contribute to students’ and teachers’ very survival. As Stacey Waite stresses, in words that I believe are quite literal, “Without the ability to develop and cultivate alternative ways of reading and composing, I might be dead” (111). This tension between literacy as survival, oppression, and resistance challenge dominant commonplace notions of literacy and highlight the intersectional harm of normative literacy practices.

Normative expectations of literacy are further complicated when we consider them through the lens of aging and adulthood. As Susan L. Lytle describes in the introduction to “Living Literacy: Rethinking Development in Adulthood,” individuals who wait until adulthood to develop—or who are prevented until adulthood from developing—the more traditional literacies of reading and writing are often framed in terms of deficit. Lytle’s study reviews the literacy narratives of older adults in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives. In her article, Lytle notes that while these narratives never specifically frame the literacy practices in terms of age, the implicit opinion often expressed by both interviewer and interviewee is clear: the narrator struggles to learn a particular form of literacy because they are acquiring that literacy outside of its expected timeframe. As such, the narrative emphasizes how the older adult must “overcome” their supposed deficit as they strive to acquire a literacy typically reserved for the youth, an experience I identify with as a person learning to read myself queerly later-in-life.

In his essay on “The Adult Literacy Processes as Cultural Action for Freedom,” Freire describes his work with “illiterate” adults in the poor and working-class communities of Brazil, critiquing the assumption that those who begin reading later in life and who “fail” to adhere to normative standards are deficient. Freire critiques the system that perpetuates literacy-based structural injustices and oppression, arguing that methods of literacy acquisition that ask students to engage in overly simplistic and decontextualized texts have little effect on adult students’ learning (618). Yet still these older adults are often framed not by their lived experiences and literacy resources, but as lacking in literacy. In their article “Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning,” Douglas Hall and Michael Harker critique the prevailing, often age-based, concept that “[l]iteracy becomes something that you either possess or do not possess, a binaristic view that overlooks degrees of literacy acquisition and development, leading to an emphasis on what people (or students) lack. . . . rather than on the degrees of knowledge [they] possess” (159). Disrupting this binary between having/not having a particular form of literacy requires that composition studies continues to challenge whiteness in our teaching; it also suggests that the field reconsiders the potential harm of connecting literacy within normative timeframes. In asking that literacy and composition studies consider erased positionalities in our critical pedagogies, I am not simply suggesting that we “add” age and sexual fluidity to the existing list of identities to consider (or

dismiss, as often happens) in a course reading or assignment. Rather, considering bisexual and later-in-life literacies might change our teaching of literacy and composition in ways that provide spaces to continually struggle with language and intersecting oppressions.

## Bisexual Literacies

Though I had been questioning my sexuality for three years, I first came out to myself the day that our student newspaper featured an article on bisexuality. I still have that news clipping tucked away in my copy of Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride*, and each time I read it, key lines hurt my heart: "Bisexuals sometimes refer to themselves as the only lowercase letter in LGBTQ. . . . many [non-bisexuals] already have their mind made up about bisexuality before they [meet anyone who is bisexual]. . . . People may want to deny bisexuality's existence . . . because it threatens their own ideas of what it means to be straight [or queer]" (Holt). But there are two lines that still sing to me: "her first relationship with a woman opened an entryway to intimacy she had never known before" and "We like to think we really have a grip on who we are, but we change . . . as our life unfolds" (Holt). These words told me that reading myself as queer felt right, but that coming out as bisexual to other queers might be more challenging than I was expecting. This disconnect propelled me to search for bisexual literacy practices that are sustaining.

What might bisexual literacy practices be? How might they be enacted? How do they contribute to queer literacies broadly? In my first few drafts of this article, I shied away from the topic of bisexual literacies, despite its place in my title. The reviewers and editors asked for a deeper discussion of bisexual literacies, a reasonable request given this special issue's focus. Yet I spent much time resisting this task. How could I describe or define something that I still was unsure about? How could I claim expertise in a practice that was still new to me? In *Dreads and Open Mouths: Living/Teaching/Writing Queerly*, Aniel Rallin, who self-identifies as queer of color writer/thinker/scholar/activist/teacher/immigrant, privileges the ongoing work of expanding our literacy practices, noting, "I like the struggles that come with belonging in the margins and do not want to become assimilated into the center" (18). I admit: I have wanted to become, to paraphrase Rallin, part of a queer center, to be fully accepted by the mythical, singular queer community.

In writing about the experience of reading myself as bisexual later in life, I have had to process many feelings and experiences that have communicated that I am not accepted, that I am alone, that I do not count; some of these messages have come from outside texts, while others have admittedly come from the story I have told myself, a narrative I am trying to revise. Writing this article was challenging because I did not want to share my story with a mainstream queer audience, one that might only suspect my motives for writing rather than question the ways in which even queer communities exclude with our literacy practices. Yet I am coming to understand that sharing my story *is* a bisexual literacy practice. I am learning that bisexual literacies also include actively seeking, reading, and engaging with the stories of other bisexuals, a practice that all those who care about queer pedagogies should emulate. Again, this is not simply to "add" to our reading lists. In "The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure," Yoshino notes that "[m]any individuals who might

otherwise identify as bisexual may refrain from doing so only because they cannot imagine that identity” (430). Providing stories allows for that imaginative, life-affirming turn. Since I am now part of a relatively small queer community, as well as part of a lifelong straight and allied community—both sustaining to me—I do not claim that my thoughts on bisexual literacies apply to all bisexuals, as we each have different ways of reading and writing our identities. But I do hope my reflections are helpful, particularly for those who, like me, are either bisexual and/or reading ourselves queer later in life and seek more stories to connect to our own.

## The Invisibility Of Bisexual Literacies

At my PhD graduation ceremony, several months after I came out to myself, I trailed into the auditorium behind my two fellow classmates. Both openly identified as queer, and both had, to my surprise, received a rainbow cord from our queer student union right before the ceremony. This exclusion suddenly left me as the lone graduate from our Cultural Studies program who was not wearing the rainbow cord: a visual text that, should I have chosen to wear it, would have encouraged others to read me as queer. At a ceremony marked mainly by traditional-aged students, this lack of a queer symbol, particularly one I did not know could be worn, was the ultimate form of invisibility. At the same time, that cord represented something that I so desperately wanted. Afterward I told a queer friend/scholar my story (“You can’t make that shit up,” they said, laughing in support), and then they said something that surprised me: “Why didn’t they offer one to you?”

“Well, they think I’m straight,” I responded, defending the act as understandable, rather than as a potential erasure of my sexuality.

“So?” my friend demanded. “They should have offered it to everyone rather than assuming to know who identifies as queer.”

In *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*, Julia Serano, who identifies as a white “transsexual woman, bisexual, and femme activist” (3) comments on the status of bisexuals: “We are presumed not to exist” (85). More concerning, Serano argues that “any attempt to assert our existence is immediately thwarted by accusations that we are hiding, faking, or simply confused about our sexualities” (85), all statements that have been made about me. In discussing bisexual invisibility, Kendi Yoshino says, “[t]his invisibility is better explained by bisexual erasure than by bisexual nonexistence” (361), an erasure that Yoshino argues is part of a “shared investment” (361) by both the broader straight and gay/lesbian communities. While many individuals within these communities obviously do not support bisexual erasure, Yoshino argues that, as a group, monosexuals not only benefit from bisexual erasure but need to actively deny or dismiss the existence of bisexuality to preserve the integrity of their own sexual identity categories. Despite queer theory’s rejection of static categories, Yoshino maintains that gay and lesbian communities often, even if unintentionally, deny the legitimacy of bisexuality in order to oppose a heteronormative world: an approach to the problem, I ironically note, that appears rather binary. Instead of pushing away bisexuals, all those committed to challenging heteronormativity might intentionally draw from bisexuals’ experiences in straddling multiple worlds, as well as our work in reshaping normative and exclusionary spaces. Yet

Serano suggests that “Our invisibility is what allows straight, gay, and lesbian folks to regularly get away with forwarding stereotypes about us” (85). As such, one goal of bisexual literacies is to affirm the existence and queer legitimacy of bisexual people—on our own terms.

Ironically, because of bisexual erasure and invisibility, much of the discourse surrounding bisexuality focuses on labels and definitions. People apparently don’t believe that we exist—while simultaneously feeling as though we are a threat to them—so a fair amount of time is spent in discussing who we are and who we are not: oral and written literacy practices that do not ultimately affirm who we actually are as people. As I was first reading about bisexuality, this emphasis on definitions was exhausting. After finally coming out to myself as bisexual, I once again had to wonder whether I was “authentic” enough to fit into the varied definitions. For example, one source claimed that bisexuals were only “real” if the person had actually had sexual relationships with more than one gender, a claim that belittled my growing attraction to women while I was simultaneously in a loving, monogamous relationship with my husband. Even the most affirming of bisexual texts included complex definitions that left me wondering where I fit.

For example, Yoshino creates a “desire-based definition” of bisexuality which “required more than incidental desire for both sexes before classifying an individual as bisexual” (377). I myself admit that seeking to “fit” into the definitions was not helpful. Heather E. Macalister, writing in “In Defense of Ambiguity,” believes that “[b]isexuality alone is too ambiguous for many people to accept” (26), a point I understand well: I am the type of person who typically likes stability rather than ambiguity and fluidity. As I learn more about my identity, I am simultaneously becoming more comfortable with ambiguity, a concept I feel is key to bisexual literacy practices. Now I find solace in the descriptions that question categories and definitions rather than foregrounding them. For example, Macalister challenges the more traditional definition of a bisexual as someone “attracted to both men and women” by asking, “*Any men? All women?*” (30), complicating a definition that would strive to simplify the complexity of our individual experiences. And Serano emphasizes that she uses the labels of transsexual and bisexual “*not* to communicate things that I have done” in terms of her gender transition or sexual practices, as “it should not be incumbent upon me to have to reduce the complexities of my sexuality and gender down to a one-word label and provide it for other people at the drop of a hat” (87), but “to build alliances with people who are similarly marginalized” (87).

As such, bisexual literacies might encompass reading and writing practices that allow people to challenge and negotiate definitions, embrace the ambiguity, seek spaces where labels are questioned, and create alliances. In creating/rejecting our own definitions, I suggest that humor is a key survival tactic in bisexual literacies. After all, if I couldn’t periodically laugh at the absurdity of my new life, I would have never made it past the tears. (After all, what do you say when the female airport security officer asks you if it would be okay if she ran her hands up and down your legs after the buttons on your pants set off the alarm? And more importantly, do you intentionally wear those pants again through security on the way home?) I was comforted when bisexual authors used humor to play with and mock definitions, including those imposed on us by a broader queer community. These definitions are sometimes playful, as when Serano suggests the initialism BMNOPPQ (Bisexual, Multisexual, No Label, Omnisexual, Pansexual, Polysexual, and Queer)—not to provide a serious replacement

for the umbrella term of bisexual or to categorize us, but to create a space where we might be more visible to each other, thereby providing a means of support (83-85). Such lighthearted approaches are crucial because as Serano emphasizes, “Th[e] lack of community has had a devastating effect on BMNOPPQ folks” (85). Macalister also uses humor to mock the supposed importance of defining bisexuality and gently chastising the assumption that bisexuals can’t be ethically monogamous.

She asks her straight friend if she’s attracted to *all* men: “What about that guy . . . who lives down the street?” (30) before assuring her friend that she has more to do with her time than go around being attracted to every human on the planet. But then she says, rather seriously, “Who I’m attracted to and what gender they are doesn’t particularly define me” (30). Macalister ultimately questions the author of the definitions: “Who decided that for bisexual people gender is the one variable in choosing partners? It’s the one variable that *doesn’t* matter” (31). Reading these humorous challenges to definitions greatly eased the pressure of having to place myself in a static category. Instead, they allowed me to create my own flexible and fluid description of my identity, a “definition” that wasn’t for anyone else but me.

## Challenging Negative Readings Of Bisexuality

At times, I have wondered if being invisible would be better than being the subject of multiple negative stereotypes: a binary, I realize, but one that takes up much mental space. Multiple texts emphasized that, as a bisexual woman, I would be rendered suspect in the queer community, that bisexuals were criticized for implicitly or explicitly supporting heteronormativity (Alexander and Anderlini-D’Onofrio; Serano). The book *Bisexual Spaces* puts it plainly, noting how “both transsexuals and bisexuals are seen as traitors, as not feminist or queer enough to be considered viable political subjects in their own right” (Hemmings 100). Apparently, bisexuals are also accused of perpetuating the gender binary. I found this claim, which Serano also contests, surprising given that no one had accused me of maintaining this binary when I was straight—and I was certain no one would have accused me of it if I had come out later in life as lesbian instead of bisexual. Others accuse us of being inherently unfaithful given that we are attracted to multiple genders, an assumption Macalister rejects by pointing out that anyone can be attracted to more than one person, and that bisexuals are no more inherently likely to either be faithful or not than anyone else. Despite all of the bisexual scholars who contest these stereotypes, I admit that I struggled with these external—and, yes, sometimes internal—readings of myself.

While I will let scholars like Yoshino and Serano reject many of these stereotypes, here I wanted to highlight one critique of bisexuals: that we simply want to maintain heteronormative privilege. For me the most painful part of my coming out process concerned my very nuclear and heteronormative family, a concept queer theory firmly critiques. Questioning my sexuality was not painful—being attracted to women began very gently and simply felt right—but later questioning whether I could remain with my husband and kids was agonizing. As I reread Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, Clare’s questions about home, queerness, and class struck deeply. Because I was from a first generation, working class and disability background with a family home in Oregon,

Clare's text called to me long before I identified as bisexual or queer, particularly the chapter on "Losing Home." After I came out to myself—yet while I was still struggling to remain with my family—I re-read Clare's text, and Clare's questions about loss and home and queerness resonated in a new way.

Though Clare was writing specifically about social class to question upward mobility, I read his questions now in a very different light: "[W]hat about the people we leave behind? . . . How do we deal with the loss? . . . [I]s queer identity worth the loss?" (40). Literacy helped me process, yes, but the very act of reading also forced me to contemplate some very painful questions. Sara Ahmed writes about this tension between loss and direction, which I found comforting:

[I]t is often loss that generates a new direction; when we lose a loved one, for instance, or when a relationship with a loved one ends, it is hard to simply stay on course because love is also what gives us a certain direction. What happens when we are "knocked off course" depends on the psychic and social resources 'behind' us. Such moments can be a gift, or they might be the site of trauma, anxiety, or stress about the loss of an imagined future. It is usually with the benefit of "hindsight" that we reflect on such moments. . . . [This reflection] does not always give us a different point of view, yet it does allow those moments to be revisited, to be reinhabited, as moments when we change course. (19)

To help us revisit such moments when we change course, Aurora Levins Morales, who writes about race, bisexuality, and disability, asks questions in her foreword to Clare's *Exile and Pride* that are key for those who have experienced trauma and seek to survive: "How do we construct and reconstruct self-love in the face of the corrosive dehumanization and abusiveness oppression inflicts? How do we sift our traumatic histories for what we can celebrate and be proud of, for nuggets of inspiration, affirmation, self-respect?" (xvi). These questions have become essential for my survival, especially as I have reshaped my family in ways that are potentially more queer, but still at times painful to navigate. As Clare writes, "My loss of home is about being queer" (35). Yet Clare also writes, "I want each of us to be able to bring our queerness home" (49).

To those who believe that bisexuals are simply wanting to maintain heterosexual privilege, I ask whether these doubters understand how simplistic that assumption is. If they have experienced the tension in holding a former husband's hand in public, knowing that to an unknowing audience that public act reads and communicates something very different than the reality. If they are present for all the insider moments in a marriage when a cross-gender couple challenges heteronormativity in small, everyday ways. If they will be a friend and support system when that marriage fails once both partners realize the wife needs more, despite the fact that the husband was her first love, best friend, and greatest ally. Shall I read my signature on my future divorce papers as a queer text or a straight text? As a symbol of heteronormative privilege or a rejection of that privilege? As both? As a third space challenging an artificial queer/straight binary? How utterly empty those questions are to write, and I hope the absurdity of them challenges simplistic notions of bisexuals who supposedly and unfairly want the best of both worlds. As if life isn't more complicated than that. While others debate my existence, in the meantime I will read that future signature as both a loss and a way home, hoping that it will eventually bring peace, knowing that it will bring more tears.

## Rewriting The Bi: Reclaiming Bisexual Positivity

There have been many affirming moments for me as a later-in-life bisexual. Holding my girlfriend's hand. Seeing her smile at me. Remaining good friends with my former husband. Parenting our children together and laughing at their antics. Authoring an article on queer pedagogy. Receiving rainbow socks as a gift. Being called a queer friend. Getting a hug from my very conservative and caring father after I came out to him. Watching my younger son wear pink sparkly shirts to school. Smiling when he says when he grows up he will add pink to the pride flag for boys who like pink. Being grateful for the students who share their own stories of sexuality and identity with me. Being encouraged to share my story. Believing I count, that I am enough. Finding spaces where I can be whole.

Although I have failed in this next literacy practice, I believe that bisexual literacies include reading and writing texts that *don't* begin by defending the stereotypes placed on us by straight, gay, and lesbian communities. That don't begin with an apology. That don't presume that others will judge us for what they presume us to be. Rather, affirming bisexual literacies allows us to shift between worlds, to unapologetically claim multiple points of attraction (even if we choose to focus primarily on one), and to read ourselves as belonging to multiple worlds, rather than as belonging to neither the gay or straight world. Bisexual literacies allow us to challenge the idea that anyone should have to prove who they are to "count" as queer.

***“[B]isexual literacies provide us with opportunities to re-write oppressive narratives. For example, people claim that the ‘bi’ in bisexuality reinforces the gender binary. What if instead we read the term ‘bisexual’ as those who challenge binaries?”***

two or more worlds? What if instead of assuming that some bisexuals simply want to maintain heteronormative privilege that we seek the knowledge of bisexuals who are, through their everyday lived experiences, very clearly aware of the ways in which heteronormative privilege works and how to challenge it in small, everyday ways?

In addition to my own experiences, there are multiple more literacy practices that bisexuals can and do engage in as we rewrite outsider narratives and reclaim positive senses of self. In *Fashioning Lives*, Pritchard discusses “fictive kinship” (128), a literacy practice Pritchard says Black queers employ to create life-sustaining friendships with literary or film characters, allowing for “insight into the Black queer experience” (134) as a way “to redress historical erasure in Black LGBTQ lives” (129). In this chapter, Pritchard introduces us to a Black bisexual man named Christopher Mallard-Scott, who was dismayed at the limited and poor depiction of Black bisexual and gay men

Additionally, bisexual literacies provide us with opportunities to re-write oppressive narratives. For example, people claim that the “bi” in bisexuality reinforces the gender binary. What if instead we read the term “bisexual” as those who challenge binaries? What if we relied on the expertise of those people who are constantly navigating between

in fiction. In employing fictive kinship, Mallard-Scott rewrites a more positive reality, creating novels that feature life-affirming Black bisexual and gay men. Pritchard clarifies that “in the face of what he experienced as an erasure . . . Mallard-Scott chooses to create what is not available to him. . . . and this affirmation through restorative literacies further exhibits self-love” (138). In describing this possibility for bisexual literacies, Pritchard emphasizes that Mallard-Scott “takes what he found dissatisfying about the text . . . and uses that to write stories that will be more affirming for others who may share his experience . . . of being a Black bisexual or gay man” (138). As I have discussed, reading about bisexuality and being immediately presented with the negative stereotypes assigned to my new identity caused me to connect literacy with mental and emotional harm, emotions that I have had to re-experience as I wrote and revised this essay. At the same time, writing this article has allowed me to re-read these texts and recognize the restorative literacy practices that bisexual authors engage in as they rewrite the damaging narratives told about us.

## Bisexual Literacies Seek To Dismantle Privilege

In her foreword to Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride*, Morales reminds us that simply being included should not be our main goal:

Being bisexual . . . meant never being fully welcomed [in queer movements], and while queerness is an important part of my identity, it’s never been my main source of comfort and belonging. Instead I have relied on pockets of solidarity and rest whose demographics vary . . . circles where queerness, disability, and brown skin overlap. (Morales *xiii-xiv*)

Given my own positionality as a white cisgender woman with much experience with heteronormativity, I recognize that bisexual literacies must actively engage in dismantling multiple forms of privilege and oppression. This idea is not mine. Much of what I have learned about invisibility and erasure, as well as the reclaiming of positive identities, I learned—and am still learning—from scholars such as Pritchard, Smith, and Morales. I also learned more about how privilege works once I began questioning my sexuality. I realized that in my previous life, when I identified as straight, I could read critiques of heteronormativity, take them seriously, and work hard to apply them to my teaching—but of course I also had the freedom, the mental space, to decide when to not acknowledge the heteronormativity that I was so deeply embedded in. Once I began questioning my sexuality, I suddenly had no place to go, and I recognized anew how my whiteness afforded me the option of deciding when and where to reflect on my white privilege—and that if I were going to identify as queer, I needed to consider all aspects of power and privilege (Cohen). Because some bisexuals, like myself, do exist between two (or more) worlds, for me this practice of simultaneously acknowledging and challenging privilege is central to bisexual literacy practices: reading ourselves both as part of the center and the margins, dealing with the tension rather than claiming it doesn’t exist, and acknowledging difference between multiple forms of erasure. In this, bisexual literacy practices might require us not to rest on other forms of privilege that we might have, but actively seek to uncover unearned forms of privilege and engage to challenge multiple forms of oppression.

## Bisexuality Later In Life

A few months after I came out to myself, I attended a conference presentation featuring local activists and community organizers; one panelist gave an excellent presentation on the local LGBTQ youth center. After the presentation, I privately asked him what resources were available for those of us who were coming out later in life. He assumed I was asking about older adults who had long identified as queer and gave the information for the one 50+ group in the area. I clarified what I meant, that I was looking for resources for people who were for the first time experiencing queer desire in middle life—and he, an expert in LGBTQ advocacy, said there really weren't any resources. Like many LGBTQ individuals, I struggled with mental health for a variety of reasons, yet the campus posters advertising such highly important resources as the Trevor Project also portrayed only young people—and signaled to me that I was indeed alone and not needed in this movement. Later, I heard of Facebook groups for people coming out later in life, and their stories tore my heart. Like me, they were distraught about potentially leaving beloved partners and losing full-time access to their children; questioning their relationships with church and family; worrying about loss of income, retirement, and access to health care. Yet sites for queer-identified women did not exactly welcome me home. Many of the women on these sites overtly advertised that they would “never date a bisexual” and “would never date a newbie.” I could not find words to express my dismay. Again, I had to stop reading.

While there are many forms of bisexual literacies, I cannot end this essay without at least touching on a literacy practice central to my bisexual identity: reading myself queer later in life. In challenging limited definitions, I suggest that “later-in-life” is a relative term, applied internally to anyone who feels they have come out or discovered their sexuality after a perceived normative timeframe, particularly if they have made significant inroads in establishing or participating in a heteronormative life—inroads which are not undone or reshaped without significant effort. Questioning my sexuality in my mid-30s while working on a college campus and living in a relatively small and rural college town meant that many of my interactions with queer texts highlighted people who were significantly younger than I was. Given my multigenerational upbringing, I had never been too concerned with age differences, but suddenly these youth-based texts were not enough. While I fully recognized and supported their value for queer youth, I craved texts that also addressed my particular needs in coming out as a middle-aged person. As Yoshino briefly notes, “bisexuals [tend to] come out as bisexual relatively later” when compared with other queers come out (430), suggesting that we might require additional literacies to navigate this intertwined, and perhaps unexpected, nuance to our identities.

***“As a later-in-life queer, I could not be certain that coming out even in queer spaces was safe, and so I had to create new ways of reading whether or not a queer person might accept me.”***

One literacy need I have experienced as a later-in-life queer is being able to navigate texts that—and this critique will seem familiar—question either our existence or motives. In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, J. Jack Halberstam cites queer psychologist Lisa M. Diamond to note that “sexual orientation in some people ebbs and flows, moving between sexual objects and not necessarily settling on one kind of body or one set of sexual practices for ever and ever” (Halberstam 83). Despite the fact that we often consider heterosexuality to be a fixed or stable identity, Halberstam explores the “instability of heterosexuality,” (81), arguing that shifts in gender and sexuality may occur throughout a lifetime. Halberstam suggests that “[w]e are too confident about the operationality of the homo-hetero binary and the male/female divide” (81). Yet as Serano notes in *Excluded*, sexual fluidity can be devalued or deemed suspect, even within the queer community—particularly if sexual fluidity does not flow neatly in the preferred queer direction. When Serano began identifying as bisexual instead of lesbian, Serano noted how “[f]or cis queers, coming face-to-face with one’s own bisexuality causes anxiety because it seems to signify a shifting back toward the heterosexual world they came from” (74). Halberstam reminds us that instead of clinging to these origin stories, “we need to grapple with the quite likely increasingly popular phenomenon of sexual fluidity over the course of a lifetime for increasing numbers of people” (83).

In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam also argues that “queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time” (152). However, I question how even queer time and texts can be used normatively. Halberstam notes, “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (*In a Queer Time*, 2). However, as I had already participated in these heteronormative reproductive logics, reading this passage initially was challenging: to me, Halberstam’s dismantling of linear time suggested that this imagining needed to occur before most of the life markers take place. Though I do not believe that is Halberstam’s argument, the connection between youth and futurity suggested to me that those who have engaged in the traditional markers of marriage and reproduction now have the possibility of only death. Halberstam argues that queerness refuses these temporal markers, even within queer spaces, but those markers can still be linear. Bisexual and later-in-life literacies can help us keep these markers queer and ambiguous. After all, as *Cruising Utopia*, author José Esteban Muñoz might argue, desires for a queer futurity do not begin at a fixed point in time.

That said, I recognize that later-in-life coming out and literacy narratives used to be the norm. As William P. Banks, one of my reviewers, wrote in his at-the-time anonymous review of my article, “As someone who came out as gay in 1991, . . . none of the coming out stories/experiences or novels I read in the 1980s and 1990s were about people my age: they were all about older folks who finally had the financial or familial freedom to ‘come out.’ That seemed, at the time, the normative idea: that you can’t be who you are until you are older and freer.” From my perspective, this trend has shifted. As such, I wonder if the emphasis on youth-based texts is still one inadvertent type of binary that we create: if people come out when younger, then we can “know” who they are, mark them early as either straight or queer.

As a later-in-life queer, I could not be certain that coming out even in queer spaces was safe,

and so I had to create new ways of reading whether or not a queer person might accept me. As Halberstam notes, “when women do come out as gay later in life, there is a presumption that they were gay all along and just lacked the right environment to admit it” (83). In *Queer Migration Politics*, Karma R. Chávez rhetorically analyzes the narrative of coming out of the closet and compares it with the narrative of coming out of the shadows for the undocumented migrant. Both moves are grounded on the assumption of the benefits of visibility politics, which emphasizes that those who truly care about the cause will visibly come out, act, and demand change. Yet as Chávez emphasizes, the expectation to come out, particularly for undocumented individuals, can be fraught with tension. In analyzing the narrative of the closet, Chávez emphasizes that “In the United States one of the most prominent ways that queers have responded to the oppression the closet produces is to demand that queers come out” (86), a demand that Chávez says flattens differences between groups rather than building coalitions.

Although coming out of the closet can certainly be a positive experience, those who are only beginning to read themselves as queer later in life can face additional pressure and judgment regarding the closet’s temporal connotations. While scholars critique the invisibility of bisexuality, the expectation of queer visibility politics demands that people either out themselves or are outed, and that those who do not voluntarily and quickly come out are deemed suspect. As I created my own literacy practices, I carefully listened to what people said about others who came out later in life before choosing to come out myself. This was a survival tactic because Chávez, in citing Michelangelo Signorile, writes that “outing demands that everyone come out, and defines the closeted—especially those in power—as cowards who are stalling progress at a crucial time” (qtd. in Chávez 86). When I originally read this passage several years ago, I did not yet consider myself to be in the closet, though I had started questioning my sexuality; as I re-read this passage for this article, I also read my earlier note in the margin: “Is there no other reason,” I had asked, not to come out other than because you are ashamed or a coward? Even in this formative period, when I did not yet identify as queer, I questioned the presumption that staying in the closet meant that one was internally homophobic. However, I am still negotiating how our literacy practices might better support those who are uniquely targeted for discrimination from queer communities if they begin reading themselves queer later in life.

## Models For Later-In-Life Queers

I desperately needed texts that provided me with models of how to read myself queer later in life *and* validated that such an identity shift could in itself be stressful. Ironically, it was not until I began researching for this article that I found such a model. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed emphasizes that “it is important to remember that life is not always linear, or that the lines we follow do not always lead us to the same place. . . . If we give up on the line that we have given our time to, then we give up more than a line; we give up a certain life we have lived, which can feel like giving up on ourselves” (18). As I write this, I have “given up” my previous line of being married to a man; and still I struggle because this means that the financial and emotional stability that I once had—including the certainty that I would always wake up each morning in the same house as my

children—is gone. Yet in all the times I have read Ahmed’s work cited, I had never seen reference the fact that Ahmed herself experienced queer desire later in life. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed writes:

[O]ne of the reasons that I became interested in the very questions of “direction” was because in the “middle” of my life I experienced a dramatic redirection: I left a certain kind of life and embraced a new one. I left the “world” of heterosexuality, and became a lesbian.

. . . For me, this line was a lifeline, and yet it also meant leaving the well trodden paths. (19)

Regardless of the details or specific timeframe of Ahmed’s personal story, this model of sexual fluidity is crucial for queer literacy practices. Ahmed illustrates the strength and potential that those who experience a re-orientation later in life have as we contemplate which path(s) to orient our desire toward—and how we will read ourselves on our chosen path.

Yet it still helps to have assistance and guidance as we navigate this path. In *Fashioning Lives*, Pritchard writes about the importance of relying on elders who can provide this type of help. In highlighting literacy practices of Black queers, Pritchard says that elders are “living individuals . . . [ who have] more wisdom and knowledge . . . by virtue of age or life experience” (138) and who can “help fill critical gaps in history, model ways of being in the world . . . and help one construct an affirming and rooted sense of self” (138). For Black queers, Pritchard argues, “elders sponsor literacy, . . . particularly wisdom and knowledge regarding Black queer life and culture” (138). Pritchard’s discussion of elders also helped me understand just why the prevalence of youth-based queer texts might not meet all the needs of older queers: we, too, seek the wisdom and experience of someone who understands what we are going through as later-in-life queers. As Pritchard would emphasize, this resource is even more crucial for Black queers and all other queers who embody intersectional identities. The emphasis on queer youth and coming out earlier in life has inadvertently created fewer older models for us to follow. Admittedly, for a long time I was stuck in my frustration that there were few resources for me as a later-in-life queer. It was not until I could serve as a mentor to another person as they were coming out that I realized I needed to more intentionally employ my bisexual literacies—and seek the wisdom and experience of multiple people—including those who are younger, queers who do not identify as bisexual, and those who identify as straight allies, all of whom have unique and valuable insight to share—whom I could “partner with,” both to guide and be guided by on our collective journey.

## Continuing Thoughts On Re-Reading Ourselves

While many literacy narratives follow a pattern of confirming a person as either literate or not, I have learned that queer literacy narratives must destabilize that pattern in multiple ways. My goal for my own story is no longer to confirm, as was admittedly once my desire, that I “count” as queer or to create a stable category for myself, but to continually reinterpret the very concept of queer—and to question what oppressions I might be reinforcing as I “claim” the label of queer. In “The Radical Potential of Queer?” Cathy Cohen writes, “I worry that as more individuals take on the identity of queer as an embodiment of sexual positionality, queer becomes less effective—if it ever

was effective—as a unifying framework for solidarity work across domains of struggle and across identities” (143). As a later-in-life queer, I have felt as though I have had to “prove” my sexuality in order to be considered a queer composition scholar, and this struggle can reify categories that I also seek to dismantle. And while I am not arguing that we simply “add” age or sexual fluidity to the list of oppressed identity categories to discuss, a move that scholars such as Cohen critique, neither do I want to suggest that age is, as Erevelles and Minear might note, simply an accent or “nuance” upon a queer experience (131). As Morales writes, “Our job is not to discover the single issue that trumps all others, to fight for the priority of what presses on our own skin. It’s to seek out the places where those skins rub” (xv). As such, the goal is not just to find spaces to read ourselves as queer, but to actively *reread* and *revise* our queer selves throughout our lives.

As I continue to re-read myself, I find myself asking how bisexual and later in life literacies might contribute to a queerer approach to composition pedagogies. In terms of composition, Hall and Harker urge that we “develop composition pedagogies that account for changes people experience over the course of a whole life” (156), pedagogies that recognize the strengths that a lifelong approach to learning—and unlearning—bring. In this unlearning, students, teachers, and composition programs might connect fluidity and queer theory in ways that challenge dominant ways of knowing, reading, and writing throughout one’s life. As Rallin emphasizes, “I write to create openings. . . . to unsettle. . . . to queer. . . . to inhabit positions that work against the conditions of capitalism, that work to sustain lives” (4). It is important that composition teachers continue to explore this implicit connection between multiple forms of erasure and literacy—particularly when we consider the impact of literacy practices on adults who are beginning to read (or who want to read) themselves as queer later in life.

As we continue to think of our students and composition programs—and ourselves—as in process or becoming, we also reconsider the multiple ways in which we might be fluid throughout our lives. Connecting fluidity to literacy challenges the notion that literacy has an expected end goal; rather, fluidity shifts literacy to an ongoing and incomplete process. As Hall and Harker ask, “How do we design courses that leave learning open-ended? How should we model for students our own incompleteness—and that our literacy is not a state of being, but is a tool for discovering who we can and want to become?” (167). Bisexual and later-in-life literacies can contribute to such discovery. Yet without examining and responding to the harmful norms that surround literacy, we risk perpetuating the very systems that we seek to dismantle. As Cohen emphasizes, queer must go beyond siloed identity categories and engage in intersectional and coalitional approaches to dismantle systemic oppressions. If this is what we mean by queer, then more of us, even those who have long identified as queer, should consider how we might continue to (re)read ourselves queer throughout our lives.

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