

# LiCS

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## LITERACY IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

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## *LiCS* MISSION STATEMENT

*Literacy in Composition Studies* is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords, because they do particular kinds of work. Composition points to the range of writing courses at the college level, including FYC, WAC/WID, writing studies, and professional writing, even as it signals the institutional, disciplinary, and historically problematic nature of the field. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted.

Given its ideological nature, literacy is a particularly fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. At its heart, literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. Orienting a Composition Studies journal around literacy prompts us to investigate the ways that writing is interpretive as well as persuasive; to analyze the connections and disconnections between writing and reading; and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on or constitutes the writer even as the writer seeks to act on or with others.

At this time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation, *LiCS* seeks submissions that theorize literacy at its intersection with composition and will prioritize work that bridges scholarship and concerns in both fields. We are especially interested in work that:

- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities
- analyzes the processes and power relations whereby literacies are valued or circulated
- adds new or challenges existing knowledge to literacy's history
- examines the literacies sponsored through college writing courses and curricula, including the range of literate activities, practices, and pedagogies that shape and inform, enable and constrain writing
- considers the implications of institutional, state, or national policies on literacy learning and teaching, including the articulation of high schools and higher education
- proposes or creates opportunities for new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies, especially those drawing on transnational, multilingual, and cross-cultural literacy research.

## Introduction To The Special Issue: Working Toward A Definition Of Queer Literacies

In our call for papers for this special issue, we—Collin, Wilfredo, and Zarah—solicited the following: “We seek to elevate the queer literacy practices we have overlooked, silenced, erased, and colonized. In this special issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies*, we call upon other LGBTQ+ scholars and accomplices to challenge what we know about queer literacy.” In this call, we sought to intermingle our own investments within literacy studies, queer theory, rhetoric and composition studies, and thrivance and futurity for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), leading to a broad citational constellation that comprised our envisioned scope of queer literacies; we as queer people, after all, are everywhere in the world and doing things.

Of course, we might have taken on too much—as some pointed out—and not have done our due diligence with our citational acknowledgement within the CFP. As Eric Pritchard pointed out in both the original and second CFP, it is necessary that we recognize the people who have done the work for us to be where we are today, doing the work that we are doing. To rectify that, we introduce this special of *LiCS* by working toward a definition of queer literacies that is contextualized within the array of literature across literacy studies and rhetoric and composition. With this issue, we therefore alchemize queer ontologies that have not been included in the popular repertoires of both queer studies and literacy studies or uptaken in the current dialogues propelling queer rhetorical and literacy scholarship. We make no new claim in saying that the queer contingency of rhetoric, composition, and literacy has been mainly white in the spaces we meet and create (i.e., caucus meetings, special issues, editorial boards, etc.). That said, queer of color ontologies are extant within queer literacy studies as an intersection of both fields—as Shelagh Patterson notes in this special issue—and thus, our definition of queer literacy follows this trajectory, beginning in women of color feminisms (e.g. Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara), following with those who laid down the work for the project of disrupting literacy normativity (Pritchard), continuing with Seth Davis’ work on the embodied literacies of Black queer beingness, Collin Craig’s scholarship on the visibility of Black queer rhetorical practices within the institution, and leading, we hope, to this special issue (Davis; Craig). Still, we need to listen: in Beverly J. Moss’s 2021 essay, “Where Would We Be?: Legacies, Roll Calls, and the Teaching of Writing in HBCUs,” Moss closes her essay on the presence and continual contribution of Black scholars in our field with the following:

[W]e have been here all along, we are still here, and will continue to be. This incomplete roll call is my way of suggesting that HBCU intergenerational exchanges are about how the very existence of those who teach at HBCUs and/or attended HBCUs . . . enter into a long-standing, dynamic conversation that not only strengthens the foundation of composition but also reimagines it. (147)

We take Moss’s position on the viability of acknowledging legacies and longstanding foundations created by Black scholars. Given our lineage, the definition of queer literacy we advance within this introduction *is not new*, or *standalone*. The work queer and/or BIPOC scholars have done has powerfully shaped not only how we conceptualize queer composition now, but composition studies

more broadly. Others have wonderfully done the work of queer literacies for quite some time now: decades worth of scholarship serves as proof, as Patterson unpacks in this issue.

What we intend with this introduction, then, is a synthesis of this work that we hope will 1) contextualize the articles within this special issue, 2) foment further engagement with queer literacy as an interrogative building block for creating just, antiracist worlds, and 3) help future queer scholars of literacy, rhetoric, and composition—the next generation—who might find handy such a definition.<sup>1</sup> We advocate and leverage this definition for world building, survival, and imagining queer futures that account for the voices, experiences, and tactics that are created at multiple intersections.

Finally, we believe that it is necessary to critically interrogate the rhetorical and theoretical viability of “queer” (as Jacqueline Rhodes contended in her keynote at the 2018 Watson Conference). We therefore centralize Black queer epistemologies and consider “quare” as a framework that allows for a speculative analysis of the limitations and affordances of how we define queer literacy. E. Patrick Johnson suggests that we interrogate the limitations of “queer” as an adequate description that fully accounts for the lived experiences and issues faced by lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender people of color who come from racialized communities. His nuancing of the term “quare” as an alternative, culturally specific positionality suggests that we expand our tools “for reading racial and ethnic sexuality” by drawing upon vernacular ways of knowing (Johnson, “Quare’ Studies”).

Although Johnson’s disciplinary call to rethink the discursive limitations of “queer” is situated in performance studies, we see Johnson’s call to “quare” “queer” as laying groundwork for theorizing queer literacy strategies that intentionally center racial and ethnic sexual identities as frameworks for knowledge making. We believe that it calls for us to be imaginative of how queer literacy performances can and should be actualized and where we might locate them, especially as we work toward defining queer literacy in ways that account for the embodied and lived experiences of queer and trans BIPOC. This rendering of literacy primes it as an expansive site, wherein the embodied practices of being in the world count, too, as literacy practices: National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standing Committee on Global Citizenship, 2020; “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age,” NCTE, 2019; “Literacy Assessment,” NCTE, 2018. So, in good faith that the definition we offer is “quare,” here is how we are using queer literacy in this special issue.

## Locating the Potential of Queer Literacies: Toward Deep Coalition Building

Twenty years after publishing “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” Cathy Cohen, in a 2019 reflection piece in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, commented on modern-day queer politics and what remains of their radical potential. Cohen asked that we “use the idea of queer as a *provocation* to imagine how we might organize across varied communities defined as ‘the other’ by the state and/or racial capitalism” (142, italics in original). Core to this coalitional approach is practice—how might we practice queer relationality beyond misinterpreted identity politics and toward the identity politics of the Combahee River Collective? How might we practice deep solidarity with the most precarious of us as a worldmaking project?

Critically imagining deep solidarity suggests that we also imagine, theorize, and practice a queer relationality that is underlined by a close attention to relation building—not just through our textual productions and intellectual agendas, but through our everyday practices and interactions with queer BIPOC and co-conspirators, and perhaps even with the allies that scholars of color remain wary around.

As countless scholars and/or activists have shown us, queer literacy practices are inherently political given that our existence as queer and trans people is political (Ferguson; Alexander; Halberstam). In our CFP, we sought works that imagined these queer politics beyond the dialogics of whiteness and the Other—too often this approach energizes, at best, the trope of multiculturalism (Kynard, “One Mic”), and at worst, the overt pomposity of white culpability (Kynard, “Center”). Rather, we home in on the actionable potential of queer literacy, the manner by which queer and trans BIPOC employ literacy practices that run counter to Western notions of rhetoric, composition, and literacy, which are “deeply mired in the muck of the logic of coloniality” (Powell, “Stories” 393). We upcycle this disengagement with white supremacy, and we seek to break from the dialogics of whiteness to celebrate the rhetorical complexities of queer and trans BIPOC literacy practices (with all their particularities), which are self-apparent for what they are: moves toward full existences in a world where joy can often be in short supply.

Queer literacies are inherently social, either in response to normativity or the learned ways we understand and uptake our queer elders’ practices for survival. Within the uneven occupation of the queer spectrum—ranging from homonormativity to excess—is willfulness and intention and risk; we argue that there are practices the field writ large (meaning the cadre of white and/or straight scholars comprising the bulk of the field) has ignored because, when someone willfully moves against, across, and between normative literacies, they are punished or made to be invisible. That said, Jacqueline Jones Royster writes on how Black women have modeled “the right to narrate our peculiar experiences, to situate them within larger social frameworks, and to enter by these terms into institutionalized discourses, whether those discourses have been designed with our viewpoints in mind or not” (5).

Indeed, the legacies of white supremacy (most readily located in the functional power of literacy normativity) demonstrate the extent to which theories and practices have operated hegemonically and tended to function with a heavy and relentlessly constraining hand. Willfulness is what it means to not go with the flow (Ahmed 82). It is required, Sara Ahmed writes, “in ordinary places” (83). As scholars committed to continuing the groundwork of an anti-racist field, we centralize Royster’s perspectives here, and through these three essays and book review, this collection seeks to provoke readers, queer or otherwise, to make new connections, to undo the notion that excess and homonormativity are in any way related to the networked terms around what it means to be willful (Ahmed gives us stubborn, defiant, rude, etc.), and instead recognize that there are expansive queer literacies that make lives possible across a variety of identive markers, communities, and perspectives that cohere into the broader politics of queerness.

Indeed, if we are to fully engage in a queer politics of the social in regard to coalition building that is viable and transformative, we must consider and interrogate strategies that we use to cultivate

our queer relations as well as literate strategies that we use for relation building. Adela Licona and Karma Chávez, in “Relational Literacies and their Coalitional Possibilities,” compel us to see relational literacies as practices that are “ripe with coalitional possibility as they can open people to new ways of understanding, learning, imagining, and being in relation to others’ stories, interests, and contexts” (96). Practicing relational literacies is about identifying partnerships that foster opportunities for locating new knowledge-making strategies and building “coalitional subjectivities” that account for individual and collective experiences. Coalitional subjectivities can cultivate cross-boundary discourses to where our knowledge making practices “operate kaleidoscopically, thereby permitting interpretation to be richly informed by the converging of dialectical perspectives” (Royster 29). As Powell notes, the converging of dialectical perspectives when energized by an anticolonial intent makes room for multiple ways of knowing, and “recogniz[es] *all* available knowledge-making practices as real options . . . as viable and valid in our classrooms and our scholarship” (“Stories,” 401). Licona and Chavez urge those of us who are doing the work of coalition building in service of disruption to see this as a recursive, ongoing project that is “change-oriented” and committed to seeking new understandings. We believe that this is both actualized and sustained in the context of dialogue with connected knowers and co-conspirators. Validating and recognizing knowledge-making practices within the context of communion with connected knowers and co-conspirators is a dimension of Black feminist epistemology that makes dialogue essential in the knowledge validation process (Collins 763).

Simply put, we locate the radical potential of queer literacies—the ways of building new worlds—in the ontological energy of on-the-ground activisms, projects, and everyday lives of queer and trans BIPOC, such as Darnell Moore’s podcast “Being Seen,” The Trans Literacy Project, National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) among countless others (Cohen; Smith). With that in mind, we contour the politics of queer literacy with the ways queer and trans BIPOC maneuver, resist, live, and thrive in a white supremacist world, which demands an intersectional rhetorical framing of literacy practices (Craig; Pritchard). To be clear, the bulk of this work has risen from Black scholars (e.g., Moss; Richardson; Gilyard and Banks; Gilyard; Banks; Smitherman, Royster), Indigenous scholars (e.g., Lyons; Powell; Vizenor), Latinx scholars (e.g., Ruiz and Sánchez; Villanueva; Medina and Luna), and AAPI scholars (e.g., Sano-Franchini, Monberg, and Yoon; Mao; Mao and Young; Young) within literacy, rhetoric, and composition studies. People of color in the field have been doing The Work for some time now, and it’s time queer literacy work across literacy, rhetoric, and composition studies responds—it’s time, dear white reader, to stop citing, planning, meeting, talking, writing mainly with your white colleagues, which forecloses the new trails the queer contingent in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies might follow (Royster).

We do not say this lightly, but rather, our intention with this statement hinges on the simple fact that citations occur beyond the textual domain of scholarly production. Put another way, with our focus on how queer literacy has been defined thus far, we locate its terms within both the citations across queer scholars in the field and the conversations we have with one another that extend queer’s meaning into both the literate and scholarly domain. Take the following example from Wilfredo regarding what happens when whiteness energizes meaning making. Wilfredo helped plan the



CCCC Queer Caucus-sponsored roundtable at the 2021 conference, and he notes the excellent works presented at the roundtable. Drs. Matthew Nelson and Shelagh Patterson spoke about their ongoing anti-racist projects and teaching at their respective institutions, offering a glimpse of what cross-caucus work might look like when the space is made.<sup>2</sup> After the session, however, work soon began for the 2022 Queer Caucus-sponsored panel, and Wilfredo was told by a senior white queer scholar that although the works presented in the 2021 roundtable were excellent, *they weren't queer*. Antiracist and infused with the potency of social justice, yes—but not queer. These moves—whose problematics lie in the siloing of identity and practice and not on that scholar, as Wilfredo believes—build brick by brick the academic house of queer literacy, wherein anti-racism is excised from the practical underpinnings of queerness. These old definitions arise, we believe, when we fail to look past our prior genealogies.

### Throwing Another Brick: Citing Past the Wall of Whiteness

Rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies writ large are not remiss in engaging in exclusionary citation politics, especially within the queer contingent. Arguably, the same white queer scholars continue to be cited because they hold the largest number of publications and, thus, the most disciplinary privilege. When queer BIPOC scholars do get cited, it is often through citation chains meant to do a quick acknowledgement (the so-called drive-by citation), and when there is engagement with their work, it runs the risk of misinterpretation, remaining surface level, or never adequately engaging with the issues at hand. For example, gender and women's studies scholar Keisha Lindsay asserts that when intersectionality is framed simply as a heuristic rather than as a Black feminist theory, it creates situations for broad interpretations of what counts as emancipatory thought and action. Lance T. McCready argues that this runs the risk of divorcing intersectionality from a distinctly feminist agenda and treating it as a normative enterprise (14). Moves like drive-by citation, misinterpreting theoretical concepts, or skimming scholarship do damage. These moves perpetuate the appearance of diverse or inclusive citation without actually building upon the theories, ideas, claims, and stories centered in BIPOC scholarship; this ultimately ensures that hegemonic and white scholarship continues to be centered. Indeed, "Citation is a strategic choice; who is cited and how they are cited are choices reflecting the priorities and values of the author" (Itchuaqiyaq, Renade, and Walton). Of course, we acknowledge that such scholars have done important groundwork for building a door, as it were, in the brick wall that is academia (Ahmed). The academy, for all its supposed liberal sentiments espoused in the mainstream media and by many of its inhabitants, is fiercely queer- and transphobic, and it was even more so just 10–15 years ago. We are thankful for the work of our queer elders. Nevertheless, citation practices also reflect the priorities and values of the field.

Throughout *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed refers to the "brick wall" that forms via the "building materials of power," which we extend here to mean the cohering of an academic enterprise via citation and scholarly engagement (91). Taking the simple idea that how we talk, plan, teach, and write create the academic worlds we inhabit via Ahmed's notion that we live within these brick

structures—for example the “tables around which bodies gather”—we propose a deep reflection on the fact that we are making a specific kind of queerness through our interactivity (99). The definitions (or lack thereof) of queerness and its actionable possibilities are likewise implicated in how we talk to and cite one another—including who gets cited. Although relying on the extant queer scholarship as a bridge to expand or nuance theories and methodologies that push us to (re)think queer literacy is viable, we also see this special issue as an opportunity to push back against normative citational practices and definitional norms and to consider alternative citational approaches—a chance to throw another brick gathered while dismantling this wall. Ahmed writes that citations are the materials by which we create these “dwellings,” and we argue that our interactions as scholars beyond academic production are not much different than citing scholarship. Through planning special issues, conferences, panels, blog posts, and more, we describe—create, even—a world where we are teaching others that some ideas, people, and places are worth engaging with while others should be avoided. When we orient ourselves to compose a lesson plan, a blog post, a chapter, an article, a book, a CFP, we are situated within an opportunity to build an experience wherein queerness is contingent on antiracism and anticolonialism. And we have to keep treating those opportunities as opportunities. We have to remain steadfast and conscious that each 50-minute lesson, each monthly reading group, each paragraph in a manuscript, each Zoom meeting with a colleague, mentee, and/or student is an opportunity.

Together, we’ve thought about how to do the work required of us when we think of the brick wall in this way, and we came away with the following questions that we advance now to you, reader, in the hopes that you’ll grapple with them, too—that you will pick them up as a brick and smash something in the name of a queerness built on antiracist action:

1. How do we use extant scholarship and acknowledge the work that came before as we work to build anti-racist futures, while simultaneously acknowledging that much of what has come before us in terms of queer scholarship has been motivated by and grounded in whiteness—moves that treat white supremacy and queer issues as mutually exclusive and not concomitant?
2. How might non-normative citational practices work as a rhetorical gesture for how we think about and imagine who we want the work of queer literacy to speak to directly?
3. How might queering citational practices, as we leverage extant queer scholarship, function simultaneously as self and group preservation while not deliberately excluding community members who have produced queer scholarship that is foundational to building a queer literacy project?
4. How do we contend with citational chains within queer literacy scholarship that are engendered by whiteness and foreclose otherwise possibilities?

The works in this special issue, we think, attend to these questions, all of which are vital to how queer literacy studies moves forward in terms of centering the joy and thriving of BIPOC. To be clear, when we say “joy and thriving,” we seek to chain the practical work of queer literacies (or how academicians do research with queer literacy in mind) to the definitions of queer literacy that activate our work. We seek to move past the center of literacy normativity—whiteness (Kynard, “Center”)—

with our definition of queer literacies, a move that foregrounds community, deep listening, and active, anti-racist action beyond writing. Actions, as they say, speak louder than words. Royster writes that “critical engagement requires a transformative vision, one that imagines the possibility of things currently unseen” (9). She writes that there is a difference between seeing, knowing, and *noticing* the experiences and knowledges of others, specifically, Black women: “I recognize, especially in cross-disciplinary work, the importance of mechanisms, including narratives, that permit knowledge to be amplified. With amplification, knowledge can be perceived as significant, understandable, *and* believable across multiple audiences” (13, italics in original). But now, 15 years after *Calling Cards* was published, we still aren’t seeing the kind of engagement with Black and Brown scholarship in queer rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies that we hope for.

The three of us have noticed how Black and Brown scholarship, experiences, and lives are used in ways that only appear to exude diversity perspectives, falling into the multicultural trope. Moreover, too often, citing Black and Brown scholarship is akin to hiring Black and Brown scholars in predominantly white institutions as a rhetorical gesture toward demonstrating equity in hiring practices, without instilling support systems that protect their time or ensure they may continue their exceptional work. The citation/hiring serves appearances without necessarily making a space more inclusive. We have personally heard from graduate students of color who wish to leave the field because they, too, recognize the pattern and do not see a space for them. The queers in the field build the same brick wall over and over again. Changing the pattern, however, does not mean we aren’t building the same wall. If we truly looked at, *noticed*, the ideas, perspectives, and experiences of Black and Brown scholars, we might not build a wall; instead, we might build a new trail.

## Queer Literacy and the Ways it Plays out in the World

Eric Pritchard expanded definitions of queer literacies, focusing specifically on how literacy practices are not necessarily tied to alphanumeracy. Literacy practices defined as reading and writing eschews the fact that we read each other and write ourselves in embodied experiences. We learn from young ages what it means to read a body. Whether this involves what our bodies are allowed to do, how we can move our bodies, how people speak to (or about) us; whether this is more how we are taught to view other’s bodies—with the tightening of our mother’s hand around ours as we pass someone, or someone declaring another “lazy”; whether we are given trucks or dolls; whether we are dressed in pink or blue; whether we are allowed to play with someone. How our bodies are directed (or not) determines what we may need to undo, or what we will continue to teach others in the future.

In Black queer culture and some other communities of color, getting read, reading others, reading and writing ourselves is instrumental to performing and fortifying our identities, both individually and collectively. Moreover, Julia Serano writes that passing and passing centrism originated in discourse surrounding race (e.g., “passing as white): “Passing’ is typically enabled by unmarked assumption, and may allow one to access privileges associated with the dominant/majority group . . . although this often comes at a price” (underlining in original). Writing primarily about passing in

the trans community, Serano asserts that to “pass” is misleading, as it assumes deception is embedded within how someone presents. This is all to say that how or whether one is read, along with the act of reading others, isn't just something we learn in childhood (whether queer identifying at that point or not). It's something we continue to do, learn, unlearn, and witness throughout our lives, as Beth Buyserie points out in this special issue.

In queer literacy practices, legibility is complicated. Our bodies determine whether or how we are legible both within, between, and outside of queer and straight communities. On the one hand, some of us want desperately to be read as queer. We make assertions through our hair, our clothing, our possessions, and our movement. We experiment. For example, in undergrad, Zarah would wear men's clothing and tuck her hair into a beanie so that when she entered the gay bars in downtown Grand Rapids, MI she might be read. But this didn't feel like her; so during her MFA, she went ultra femme in high heels and tight dresses. As the only out queer in her program, she took pride in coming out in her poetry and to her students. Over time, she learned that challenging normative notions of queer, both within and outside queer communities, was critical—over time, she learned to simply be her “passing” self but to use her voice. In other words, her experimentation with dress and movement with her body helped her understand that she could challenge what it means to be read.

Voice is another means by which queer people write themselves and read each other. Through inflection, volume, and flair, we use our voices to assert our identities. It's not just what we say, but how we say it. Writing one's voice may be a fleeting moment in a conversation where we may otherwise pass, a means of testing whether someone could accept this part of our identity; or, this may be the dominant means by which we communicate our queerness in the world.

Our values also exude queer literacies. For example, how you engage in politics: many would call someone a “bad gay” for voting for Trump. Others might be named a “bad gay” for not watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* (or not following all of its iterations beyond the main show). If you are coupled and you decide to have children (because you can afford to), you may be read as “successful” within homonormative lenses but a sell-out in other circles. If you are trans and change your name but choose not to (or can't afford to) make any physical or biological changes to your body, your cis peers read you—publicly, privately, internally. When we note through conversation, interactions, and observation what actions queers are taking, we engage in a kind of literacy practice that is gauging how well someone has made themselves legible and (too often with judgement) acceptable. Within queer communities we are constantly pushing what it means to be read, who gets to read us, and whose reading matters.

The ways we read our own and others' bodies are wrapped up in policing and legibility. Take the Trump Administration's HUD Proposal for homeless shelters and trans people, which presupposes a shelter worker can determine whether a person is a man or woman (whatever that means) and should gain admittance to the shelter: “The Proposed Rule renders trans people as objects their nontransgender counterparts (shelter workers) must orient toward” (Moeggenberg, Edenfield, and Holmes, in press). For another example, in the state of Minnesota, if someone with a uterus wants to be a surrogate for someone, they have to have birthed their own child and kept it. Further, if one is legally married, even if the egg and sperm are not those of the carrier or their legal spouse,

their spouse has to sign off on their rights to the fetus. Policing legibility occurs at the local, state, and federal level. It is quite literally written into law. Federal money is also allocated to foster and adoption agencies that discriminate against LGBTQ people from building families. Thus, institutions inculcate publics to engage in literacy practices, however harmful they may be.

There is also policing that happens in media, in publics, on the street, and in small circles over PBR or fancy cocktails. We saw the policing that occurred with trans women in the 2000s with popular talk show hosts. We saw what types of queers were allowed in television and movies then, too: *The L Word*, *The Hours*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Milk*, *Transamerica*, etc. Few of these centered on race until the 2010s.

And there are small moments of literacy practices that we internalize, too, where someone calls you “faggot” from their apartment window or out of a car window (Wilfredo has had this happen to him three times) while you’re walking to work. Where someone says you haven’t had the right kind of fuck to know if you’re really gay (Zarah has had this happen several times). Where someone says they’d “never guess” you were queer (Collin has had this happen more than a few times). Where someone uses the wrong pronouns repeatedly. Where someone says you’re in the wrong bathroom. There are moments where you read yourself, too. Where you’re standing in front of a mirror and wondering if your body is small enough, big enough, butch enough, femme enough, tough enough, fierce enough.

Legible.

Being legible or not. Being seen or not. The practice of moving between these spaces. Enjoying the in-betweenness of legibility—these moves are valuable not just for finding, knowing, and building community with one another. These moves are also about survival. And our field has been good about making queer practices more legible for a predominantly white, cisgender, able-bodied audience. We have moved from the debate about whether to discuss anything queer in the classroom at all to seeing how queer can be a methodology that creates an inclusive classroom, period. But much of this has been steeped in white, lesbian, and gay logics, with little attention to BIPOC, transgender, and bisexual literacies. As Pritchard argues in “Black Girls Queer (Re)Dress: Fashion as Literacy Performance in Pariah,” if literacy work “includes the creation and affirmation of the self, the construction and sharing of knowledge, and critically questioning, resisting, and disrupting regimes of power, domination, and literal and symbolic violence in everyday life” (129), then there is a great deal within queer literacies we have failed to attend to.

## Overview of the Articles and Book Review

The scholarship that follows our introduction engages in the work of fucking with our notions of queer literacies. Each piece has moved the three of us—Wilfredo, Collin, and Zarah—to resee queer literacies in new ways. Moreover, as we sent drafts to reviewers and reviewed revisions ourselves, we found ourselves getting something more each time. Perhaps that’s what we want out of this issue: for you, reader, to get something more each time. We want you to engage deeply and to cite with intention. We believe that each contribution offers intimate portraits of how community, the body,

and situating oneself among the voices of others is what queer literacies are all about.

In “Does Every Lesbian Have a Superpower that Makes Them Out and Not Dead by Suicide?: A Poetics Against Standardizing Literacy Narratives,” Shelagh Patterson narrativizes the embodied possibilities of the literacy narrative, gifting us a poetics by which we might reframe the genre as, in fact, genreless. Through a tripartite structure—literacy narrative, historicization, and archival gift—Patterson attunes us both to the transformative power of US third world feminist praxis (via Lorde, Rich, Sandoval, Bambara) and its oft foreclosure in professional settings that require such work (the first-year writing curriculum, for example). Uptaking archival work centered on US third world feminists teaching of writing in the City College of New York (CUNY) from the 1960s–70s, Patterson weaves together two historical oversights: 1) the erasure of US third world feminist thought within popular feminist discourse (read, white feminism) during the 1980s and 90s and 2) the overlooked popular history of rhetoric and composition as tied to Black struggle and activism across varying contexts in the US. As Patterson notes, “Damage is done when we lose sight of how university administration dictates what college writing is, how the social and political moment creates different possibilities for student consciousness, and how a diverse polyphonic faculty engaged in social justice education with their students shaped the direction of writing pedagogy and university policy” (5). Perhaps more incisively, Patterson contends that “damage [is done] to our field due in the erasure of the identity of third world feminists while we practice and present their ideas” without talking about where we got those ideas—such as the literacy narrative as a popular genre in first-year writing (5). The two historical facts entwine, and so Patterson calls us to remember that the genre constraints of the literacy narrative exist only insofar as we allow them to remain; re-remembering our history as a field and centering the praxis of US third world feminists shifts us toward a poetic capaciousness beyond genre.

In “Reading Yourself Queer Later in Life: Bisexual Literacies, Temporal Fluidity, and the Teaching of Composition,” Beth Buyserie disrupts the temporal qualities we too often ascribe to sexuality. She reminds us of the more tangible ways in which we are read by others. “How long have you been out?” is a question we ask each other when we are in our early 20s. “Are they out?” is a question we might ask a friend going on a date. The answers to these questions impact our perceptions of how comfortable and how “put together” another queer is. They affect whether we accept each other and whether it is worth building community. Buyserie troubles these questions, perhaps even pointing to their damage, if not their irrelevance, especially for bisexual people. She traces how finding oneself in queer texts is complicated: those texts simultaneously provide a refuge and resource while challenging positionality. Using autoethnography and literacy scholarship, Buyserie describes (and demonstrates) how coming out later in life is a profound and painful literacy practice. A small card on her office door, a graduation cord, and scholarship—Kendi Yoshino, Sarah Ahmed, Karma R. Chávez, Julia Serano, for example—these are things that are slippery.

Rhetorics of coming out are steeped in gay and lesbian ontologies and leave little room for what is otherwise perceived as deviant: bisexuality. Buyserie builds her literacy narrative toward how we might see bisexual literacies within composition. She asks, “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 two or more worlds?” Her article powerfully positions

us as pedagogues to realize that the multifaceted challenges in our lives can be great sources of ethos, of strength. When we read Buyserie's essay, we are taken on a journey that is beautiful, raw, painful, and profoundly honest. She reminds us that queer literacy studies is just getting started.

In "Trade: Sexual Identity, Ambiguity, and Literacy Normativity," Seth E. Davis centers the literacy narratives of Black queer people attending Harlem Pride in order to investigate discourses that are constructed around trade in the Black queer community. Davis defines trade as a term used by Black queer people to identify the sexually ambiguous behaviors and identities of men who resist "femme, bottom, or queer personas in casual and professional spaces for fear of being harassed, ostracized, or not seen as sexually attractive" (49). His ethnographic exploration situates trade within a queer literacy paradigm, highlighting ways that his participants engage in "reading" and "pulling" trade as a sexual literacy. These literate behaviors, what Davis identifies as a subset of "fierce literacies," are situated within a broader repertoire of community-oriented, Black vernacular queer literacy practices. Davis deftly reveals an intersecting dynamic between practicing Black queer literacy and interrogating heteronormative Black sexual politics. The acts of reading and pulling trade that are identified in his chosen literacy narratives are underlined by and through how trade is read, who gets to participate in the literacy event of reading, how reading functions as a way of constituting trade, what these readings mean for the conditions of legibility for trade, how these readings might dictate the discursive possibilities of queer living for trade, and if those who live in cisgender bodies that are identified as trade get to play a role in their naming. Davis astutely calls for us to both consider and interrogate ways Black queer literacies are used to read words, worlds, and bodies queerly, and how those readings can be informed by the bodies that we live in as well as bodies that we externally identify, name, and designate for pleasure. Furthermore, ethnographic analysis centers fierce literacy practices to engage and problematize trade as a site of exoticized Black sexual conquest, Black hegemonic masculine agency and dominant heteronormative scripts about sexuality.

Finally, Ruby Mendoza provides a salient review of Karma Chávez's new book, [The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine, and Resistance](#), contextualizing the book within the disciplinary purview of rhetoric and composition. As Mendoza astutely posits, we can glean much from understanding the rhetoricity of HIV/AIDS in the context of another global pandemic, as well as the subsequent implications in how to understand literacy amid the cistem that is white supremacist cis heteropatriarchy.

In sum, we look forward to the coming months and years where we see Patterson, Buyserie, and Davis taken up, as well as what Mendoza will bring to the field. We hope to see the bricks they throw create lots of openings in walls. We want to see more doors and windows, and we are going to follow their lead.

*Collin Craig—Hunter College*

*Wilfredo Flores—Michigan State University*

*Zarah C. Moeggenberg—Metropolitan State University*



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shout out to Michael Faris and Matt Cox, whose own work building “An Annotated Bibliography of LGBTQ Rhetorics” has also paved the way for future generations of queer scholars within writing and rhetoric. We are indebted to them and their work and have considered the temporal longevity of our own work here because of it.

<sup>2</sup> CCCC has traditionally grappled with making such space given that most special interest groups and caucuses meet at the same time, meaning those with intersecting identities have a difficult time attending multiple identity- and interest-focused meetings.



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# Does Every Lesbian Have a Superpower that Makes Them Out and Not Dead by Suicide?: A Poetics against Standardizing Literacy Narratives

Shelagh Wilson Patterson Montclair State University

## KEYWORDS

US third world feminism; literacy narratives; first-year writing; poetics; CUNY

*Whether or not we can safely attribute the following scholium to Kant's kiss—it may well be worth pondering the possibility to think and kiss at the same time.*

—Eric O. Clarke

## Part I: A Literacy Narrative Does Every Lesbian Have a Superpower that Makes Them Out and Not Dead by Suicide?

I've been taking the L Train a lot these days. Partly because on the weekends the J/Z hasn't been running from Manhattan to Brooklyn, nor has been the M. And then partly because the growing literary scene in Bushwick can no longer be resisted. I don't like the L, but I do. It's complicated. I do not like Williamsburg. And the L is a Williamsburg train filled with folk heading to Williamsburg. I have the superiority of an OG and an anger of the colonized and displaced. In college I would call Williamsburg: Queens.

I was from real Brooklyn. Grew up round the corner from the most dangerous drug block in the city. My building was safe. The kingpin's daughter living in the apartment below. I always wondered, if I knew drugs were being distributed from the corner window in the large lobby of high alabaster ceilings, fireplace, and marble floors where we would roller-skate and play tag, then how could the cops not know. My grandmother's house was in Crown Heights, the heart of the Caribbean and Hasidism. In college, I would never get off the 2/3 at Grand Army Plaza the borderline of the (then) hood and Park Slope. I did not want to be identified as the Slopie I was: born and educated there through junior high (Methodist Hospital, playgroup, 3rd Street playground, Prospect Park, Pino's, Little Things, Community Bookstore, Pioneer, Food Co-op, Tarzian's, Cracker Jack, Berkley Carroll, 321, Garfield Temple afterschool, St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church, St. Francis Savior's

softball team, the rainbow program at 51s). In college, I would get off at Eastern Parkway with the other Black people, brown people, the working class. And then, a decade or so later, I would make a point to get off at Grand Army Plaza and not Eastern Parkway. I'd rather be seen as a Slopie than a gentrifier. I was from real Brooklyn.

There was one time not too long ago on the subway platform at Grand Army Plaza a white woman with a bicycle asked me to give her my seat because she needed the aisle because of her bicycle. I had heard about the white entitlement of the people moving into my old neighborhoods, but this was the first time I had encountered it up close. I told her no and honestly was amused.

These days on the L, I like to stand in the crunch of the crowds and not hold on to any poles. A performance of balance and skill. I might not be able to afford to live in my borough, but I can surf the subway with the skill of a fish who grew up in the ocean.

My dad taught us how to stand feet slightly apart, knees imperceptibly bent, and to move with the bumps and jolts of the train rattling along track. He taught us the cred that comes with being able to stand in a crowded train without needing to hold on to anything. He taught us the joys of being in the first car and looking out the window with the same view as the driver. He taught us in which tunnels were the subway art (just after DeKalb Ave on the D as it heads to the Manhattan Bridge) or when you could see the Statue of Liberty (on the F train as it curves towards or away from Carroll Gardens). He taught us to memorize not just the subway map but also the system. To this day I not only know which car to be in, but which door, to be the first out and first up the stairs to move faster than the crunch of people. My mum, claustrophobic and hater of crowds, taught us that—to be always the first out the train up the stairs through the turnstiles up the second set of stairs and out onto the street. Our dad taught us how to be calm and prepared to lead from within.

A point of pride. When I first moved to Pittsburgh, my friends would still call me from New York to get directions. My nickname, GSP. I met my first love in the subway. A group of us were heading from the neighborhood we called the Neighborhood Divine, and I was given the task to coordinate with Alexis who had just moved back to the city and lived one stop south of us. By then we had cell phones and Erica handed me hers to coordinate with Alexis what time Alexis needed to leave her apartment to get to the 1/9 platform of the 96th Street Station so that she would catch the train we would be on. This was before apps like Station or even the digital signs with the time to next train. This was skill. We coordinated when to leave and where on the platform to stand. And when we pulled into 96th Street there we all were as we had said we would be, and she got on without us having to get off and nobody had to wait. And then, later that evening, smoking cigarettes outside the bar our friends were throwing a lesbian party at in the East Village, Alexis solved my biggest dilemma of the summer-I-had-to-move-to-Pittsburgh-for-PhD-school, and I didn't know how to drive. Just as she was right there when the subway doors had opened, she said, *I have a truck, I'll move you to Pittsburgh, I love Pittsburgh*. And then she did.

What is the connection between knowledge of the MTA Subway system and lesbian love? There is a choreography of movement that New Yorkers have as we navigate the underground network of tunnels. And there are codes of what is acceptable movement and what is not. My father taught us to use the poles as jungle gyms on empty weekend evenings. In high school, when I began commuting

on a daily basis, occasionally there would be a flasher or public masturbator, and in the stillness around there was a safety in knowing that everyone was aware and watching to make sure the boundary that hadn't quite yet been crossed wasn't. In high school I learned to say loudly do not touch my ass when someone tried to use the crowds as a cover for harassment. I learned the power of public shaming what someone would want private. Growing up knowing how to navigate what many see as dangerous chaos is a superpower for coming out and being out and remaining out.

One of the few times I was proposed to was on the subway. In the early mid-90s, I had a babysitting gig on a weekday evening after dinner, after rush hour. I would ride the back of the train where nobody else was so that I could smoke a cigarette—just to enjoy the freedom of smoking a cigarette where it was not allowed. For a few weeks, I would overlap with this brother who would be in the last car when I got on at Grand Army Plaza who was riding the last car to smoke his crack pipe in peace. For a brief moment we were friends, and although I didn't accept his proposal, it filled me with love and pride.

## Part II: The Roots of Composition in Struggles for Open Admissions and Free Tuition

In *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition Literacies Studies*, Carmen Kynard provides a history of composition literacy studies by centering Black freedom struggles from slavery through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the shift from investing in schools to investing in the prison industrial complex in the 1980s that continues through the present. Kynard centers the intimate relationship between freedom struggles and writing pedagogy at HBCUs as a key location for understanding our field's history. She devotes two chapters to a complex analysis of the influence of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, a book foundational to the field that developed inclusive writing pedagogy while at the same time created limiting and limited representations of what literacy can and should be for students who resist the norms of Standard American English. Shaughnessy wrote *Errors & Expectations* while she was directing the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program at City College during the 1960s and 1970s. Kynard argues the importance of contextualizing Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations* and CUNY in the 1960s and 1970s within the radical traditions *Vernacular Insurrections* lays out as part of "a reconceptualization of who and what shaped the field" (221).

Kynard explains: "There is little evidence in our current mainstream historiography of basic writing in the 1970s that the students were provided with a space where writing and its form could take on racial justice in the way that the *content and style* of Du Bois's writings and the writings of BAM writers did" (232). The recent publications of *LOST & FOUND: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* from archives of four US third world feminist poets teaching in the SEEK program during Shaughnessy's tenure as director allow us to see that the basic writing students in the SEEK program were "provided with a space where writing and its forms could take on racial justice in . . . *content and style*" (232). The recent *Lost & Found* publications provide ample evidence that indeed students

in the 1970s had the space to develop writing practices within the university to tackle racial justice on the levels of *content and style* as part of the fights for free tuition and open admissions. These publications enable an important extension of Kynard's project where the writings of the radical teachers on the ground can replace the monolith of Shaughnessy's *Errors & Expectations* for understanding the influence of SEEK for literacy studies. How was this important part of our history lost and at what and whose cost? We must turn greater attention to the foundational influence US third world feminists have had in shaping literacy studies in the context of fights for free tuition and open admission. To do otherwise may dilute the transformative possibilities toward which our pedagogy and scholarship reaches.

In a quiet footnote in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval argues the academic erasure of the US third world feminists belies the continued transformative power of their work. She writes:

The mystery of the academic erasure of U.S. third world feminism is a disappearing trick. Its exemption from academic canon short-circuits knowledge but secures the acquittal of a "third," feminist "force" about which Derrida suggested "it should not be named." Not named, he hoped, in order that what is performative and mobile never be set into any place: freedom resides, thus, everywhere. It is out of this terrain that US third world feminism calls up new kinds of people, those with skills to rise out of citizenship to agency: countrypeople of a new territory. For these countrypeople-warriors who are no longer "US third world feminist," the game is beginning again, new names, new players. (195, note 22)

Sandoval writes the academic erasure of her countrypeople as magic. In a disappearing trick, something is there but then it's not, or is perceived as not there, but is actually still there just beyond perception—the perception of movement outwits the limits of knowledge, and movement is free. The influence of third world feminism is on our streets and in our communities, our arts, our politics, our friendships and loves, our nutrition and health, and in our classrooms, our syllabi, our assignments, and our fields including composition and rhetoric. Sandoval casts their erasure as a positive. However, in the field of composition and rhetoric, their invisibility may be doing more harm than good. The emergence of literacy narratives as a best practice in first-year writing (FYW) pedagogy is one possible site for remediating knowledge by historicizing literacy narratives within the coalition building by feminists within and beyond academia in the second half of the 20th century United States. To do so may help us approach literacy narratives without the binding constraints of genre, as I resisted genre conventions in the above literacy narrative. I drew on practices of writing as an act of survival, which I learned to do through US third world feminist praxis by writing myself into the world and through it.

For Sandoval there is no mystery. She locates the academic erasure of US third world feminism in feminist scholarship of the 1980s that marginalized the theoretical work of feminists of color as "mere 'description'" or as "the special force of poetry" (47). In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval draws direct correlations amongst the work of writers like Franz Fanon, Frederic Jameson, and Roland Barthes with the praxis of US third world feminism as mapped in publications including *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sisterhood Is Powerful* and by authors including Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nellie Wong, and Paula Gunn Allen. Sandoval makes visible a web of connections that



“summons a new subject capable of love, hope, and transformative resistance” (Davis viii).

In the twenty years since the publication of *Methodology of the Oppressed*, this dynamic cohort of thinkers, writers, and friends have gained more academic visibility. Most notably the 2017 National Women’s Studies Association’s annual conference was dedicated to a revisiting of the ideas, actions, and women associated with the Combahee River Collective Statement. However, in composition and rhetoric the influence of this dynamic cohort is felt in many places while still being largely invisible. I have a particular worry that the erasure may be doing more damage than good here. Eric Darnell Pritchard’s essay “‘Like signposts on the road’: The Function of Literacy in Constructing Black Queer Ancestors” discusses the importance of us knowing our Black queer ancestors in terms of finding our own spaces in the academy. Pritchard explains the “historical erasure is a deterrent to the full opportunities for growth, affirmation, and community made possible through literacy practices aimed at achieving rootedness” (31). When we present the ideas and practice of US third world feminism without reading and teaching their texts, we promote a process of who we see and who sees themselves as scholar. This process maintains a whiteness of a field that most of us do not even desire to remain white, even if many of us have not found the bravery to fully resist and transform.

Like Kynard argues in *Vernacular Insurrections*, Patricia Laurence similarly suggests damage to our field due to the erasure of the identity of third world feminists while we practice and present their ideas. Shaughnessy’s widely influential study of basic writing, *Errors and Expectations*, has become metonymic shorthand for the dynamic local of City College in the 1960s and 1970s, “belying the ‘dialogical’ nature of educational movements and the ‘rich’ description of people, programs, institutions, and politics” (19). Damage is done when we lose sight of how university administration dictates what college writing is, how the social and political moment creates different possibilities for student consciousness, and how a diverse polyphonic faculty engaged in social justice education with their students shaped the direction of writing pedagogy and university policy. While Laurence does not name the faculty, the *Lost & Found* publications establish roots of composition and rhetoric in the work of Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, among other poets teaching composition at CUNY during struggles for open admissions and free tuition.

*Lost & Found* publishes selections from the archives of poets to “illuminate understudied aspects of literary, cultural, and political history” (“About Lost & Found”). In 2013, the series published “*What We Are Part Of*” *Teaching At CUNY: 1968-1974*, the first of four publications focused on the archives of a community of poets teaching primarily in the SEEK program at City College during a time of sweeping change as higher education attempted to respond to the pressing policies of the Civil Rights Movement. The energy emerging from the integrationist efforts of City College in Harlem, a mecca of Black and Puerto Rican families, transformed writing pedagogy as we knew it and became “a reciprocal incubator for student and faculty radicalization” (Reed 48). Under a cohort of teachers including Aijaz Ahmad, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, David Henderson, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Raymond Patterson, Adrienne Rich, and Mina Shaughnessy, the writing classroom became a place of two-way learning for teachers to learn from students as much as students learn from the teachers: central to this shift was the teacher’s perspective of per students. Students were not seen as the problem; the problem was an educational system set up to

encourage failure.

To lay a groundwork of student success, the writing classroom has to become a place where students and teachers together can undo the damage of racist education. Shaughnessy abstracted from the work happening in the SEEK program and Open Admissions policies in *Errors and Expectations* to offer what we now accept as the commonplace of student-centered teaching (Laurence; kaufman; Kynard; Savonick). At the time of writing there are publications from the archives of four of the poets who taught writing during the first years of the SEEK program. In typical *Lost & Found* style, each publication is edited collaboratively by a team of scholars teaching and researching at CUNY and are book-ended by editorial essays and biographies that present the archives in the larger contexts of the poets' lives and worlds as well as pointing to previously published texts on their teaching at CUNY. Through these four publications, "we can begin to reconstruct a defining moment in the relationships between the work of poets and writings and the teaching of writing" (kaufman 1) and remediate those scholarship practices that continue their "exemption from academic canon" to better wield their power as a third force within our disciplines and classrooms.

The moves used in the 1980s to create the conditions of academic erasure are still at play here in the 21st century within texts that are useful for doing anti-racist queer pedagogy in ways that continue to uphold the center (and much of the margins even) as straight and white. The segregation within composition and rhetoric continues to serve the hegemony of white supremacy. It may be useful to see these moves at play in contemporary contexts that maintain processes of white supremacy even in projects that can be used to dismantle it. As Sandoval explains, these moves "are called on to tempt, inhabit, and shape not only the most obedient and deserving citizen-subject, but also the most rebellious agent of social change" (119).

Joseph Harris' widely taught *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* is a wonderful example of the invisible force of US third world feminism in composition studies. The central premise of Harris' book is that there is an intimate relationship between words and action, and it offers the reader and writer a set of moves to analyze other writers' projects and develop their own projects in conversation with other writers. As Harris explains:

A project is something that a writer is working on—and that a text can only imperfectly realize. (Of course, any text you write will also hint at possibilities of meaning you had not considered, imply or suggest things you had not planned. A text always says both less and more than its writer intends). To define the project of a writer is thus to push beyond his text, to hazard a view about not only what someone has said but also what he was trying to accomplish by saying it. (18)

Harris presents a project as something writers are working on in a text but also as something they are working on in their own lives beyond the text. This approach to writing resonates with Audre Lorde's explanation of writing in the canonical essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." Lorde argues, "Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors" (39). As a pedagogical tool in FYW classrooms where many students have been trained to turn off imagination and treat essay writing as a process of filling in a predetermined form, project-based reading and writing demands

personal engagement. Harris circumvents the contributions of feminists of color who developed a praxis of writing as action and looks to J. L. Austin's work on the performative sentence, particularly "expositive verbs," as the influence to his approach to reading and writing as actions for developing subjectivity allowing US third world feminism the power of a third force (4).

Harris, a composition scholar committed to student engagement, presents a white-washed picture of the field, a practice that may be doing more harm than good in composition and rhetoric. It's not really a problem in most of his book because he is offering abstraction. However, he ends his chapter on countering with a note on civility, arguing for performances of humility and grace when exploring where a reader's ideas diverge from the writer's; he argues for "the art of honest yet civil disagreement" (68). There is a lot to admire in a rhetoric of kindness, but Harris doesn't account for the power and need of anger as a tool for writing that breaks the chains of oppression. When we contextualize Harris' project in the debates that emerged from the specific historical and geographical moment at CUNY where students literally burned a building, we may see the need to expand Harris' art to include Lorde's discussion of how to use anger and how to assess and respond to appropriately directed anger. For Lorde, "anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" ("Uses of Anger" 131). It is a source of mutual empowerment and a process that engenders self-scrutiny and examination of structures of oppression to survive and transform them. Anger, in the hands of Lorde, is a literacy that enables an exploration of power dynamics between self and others and is an essential process for Black women to navigate their specific challenges in academia. As Lorde explains, "Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters" (129). The history provided by the *Lost & Found* publications shows that our lesbian ancestors are also our composition-rhetoric ancestors. The respective praxes share an originary locale: CUNY City College in the 1960s and 1970s. The radical friendships of a cohort of poet-scholars teaching at CUNY are among the foundations of US third world feminism, *and* that same conversation manifested some of our commonplaces in composition and rhetoric including student-centered teaching and teaching literacy as a practice of self-empowerment that can create systemic change. The processes that Lorde describes as anger are the same processes that composition and rhetoric calls literacy.

If the mystery of the academic erasure of US third world feminism is a disappearing trick, we see a recent manifestation of the act in Jessica Restaino's beautiful and moving book *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*, winner of the 2020 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. Restaino develops a methodology for performing the role of the rhetorician as listener and scribe rather than persuader as she uses queer theory and feminism to build trans-disciplinary coalition amongst the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Her "impulse . . . is to . . . claim our mobility, our essential capacity for seepage and spilling over" (73). Restaino draws on the work of psychologist Jessica Benjamin, whose work helps Restaino understand her collaboration with her dear friend Sue Lundy Maute as Maute lived with and died from stage four breast cancer. Restaino animates rhetorical performance as an act of surrender that allows for a third space where coalition building is possible.

In the section where Restaino acknowledges her influences to her own approach, she explains,

“This is not, however, a study of breast cancer narratives, though such work is emergent and I think compelling in rhetorical studies; Sue’s ‘breast cancer story’ is not mine to tell in any succinct or comprehensive way” (35). Then, in a footnote, Audre Lorde’s feminist exploration of cancer, capitalism, friendship, self-conscious living, and language justice disappears with a sleight of hand:

There is however an extensive body of such cancer narratives, including Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals* and many others; also of note is emerging scholarship on breast cancer narratives as they unfold online. See especially Beemer, “From the Margins of Healthcare.” (162, note 10)

Restaino marginalizes *The Cancer Journals* by simplifying its genre to cancer narrative in a sentence where she further contains narrative as an object of study rather than story as an essential creative force in human reality (Powell 429, n1). Yes, *The Cancer Journals* uses narrative, but the codex is generically hybrid, as in many feminist publications, and includes Lorde’s 1977 Modern Language Association speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” selections from private journals, poems, and the polemic “Breast Cancer: Power Vs. Prosthesis.” The 1997 special edition adds a multimodal final section called “Remembering Audre” that includes six photographs by photographer Jean Weisinger and twelve tributes. Lorde’s investigation into the role of lesbian friendship while living with breast cancer and the way the special edition diffracts the gaze to her friends still living may have created the space for Restaino’s project and be fertile ground for future studies of feminist rhetoric and ethics in love and illness committed to anti-racist coalition building.

What prevents Restaino engaging Lorde as ancestor and theorist? Restaino’s quiet dismissal of Lorde’s project reanimates the move, which Sandoval identifies as the move to categorize poetry as mere description, that helped spur the initial erasure of US third world feminist texts from our canons. Restaino positions Lorde’s book outside of her conversation because it is narrative and what Restaino is doing is feminist rhetoric. However, in that assertion Restaino relies on “boundary lines designed to demarcate ‘discipline’” in ways that “undermine the roots of . . . rhetoric-composition, as inherently hybridized, interdisciplinary work,” the very roots her book desires to animate (73). The problem may lie in “the pervasive operative presumption that general theory or conceptual reflection is formulated elsewhere than in African Diasporic (American) studies, and that it is only applied here” (Chandler, qtd. in Weheliye 114). Too often, third world culture is still seen as a problem to solve rather than the keeper of our solutions.

In addition to the role hegemonic feminism has in framing the work of feminists of color as description, the field of composition and rhetoric has largely ignored the contributions of US third world feminism in shaping approaches to literacy narratives. The emerging pedagogies about and for teaching literacy narratives in FYW classrooms is one possible location for remediating the damage of the academic erasure. Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter in their inspiring essay on teaching literacy narratives in FYW gesture to this history as a possible remedy for the challenges of teaching and writing literacy narratives. They write: “We wonder: how has it taken us so long to shift the blame to the subject *as taught*? The answer to this question, we suspect, is a complicated one, having to do with disciplinary histories and formations, values and aspirations, commonplaces of theory and practice. That is a robust and necessary direction for future inquiry” (431). Even as Lindquist

and Halbritter acknowledge there may be dire consequences to the way our histories have been disciplined, in placing this work in the future, they render invisible projects like Kynard's that have already laid out traditions that challenge the commonplace of centering white thought in geographies gripped by histories of colonial white supremacy, genocide, and racial slavery. I wonder what our FYW commonplaces would be if white scholars studied Black tradition as we stop teaching white thought as if it existed outside of a conversation with multiple traditions.

To resist teaching process as genre, Lindquist and Halbritter developed a syllabus where a literacy narrative taught at the beginning of the semester is returned to as part of a final reflective essay. They assert the particularity of their approach and encourage additional strategies.

At the public university in northern New Jersey where I teach, we have begun teaching literacy narratives as the first essay in our FYW sequence to address an increase in W/D/F grades. The assignment is meant to provide greater flexibility in writing style and provide students an opportunity to write about a topic about which they are already knowledgeable: themselves. The assignment that we offer to our students undermines that potential flexibility by establishing genre conventions of fiction. The assignment explains a successful literacy narrative has:

- A well-told story: conflict or crisis, resolution, suspense.
- Vivid detail: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, descriptions of places and people.
- Significance: Even though this narrative is about you, it must have a controlling central claim and purpose.

To achieve these goals the assignment suggests focusing on a single “brief, specific moment” whose significance should be obvious. There are more guidelines, criteria, and instructions packed into three single-spaced pages that encourage vivid verbs and meaningful dialogue, among other things. When I was invited to use our assignment to write a narrative (included above) as part of our unpaid, end-of-the-academic-year programmatic work, I decided to take the NYC subway system as my literacy. As I began writing, I immediately felt weighed down by the guidelines to approach story as generic fiction.

I wanted to enjoy the process of writing the literacy narrative. To do that I ignored many aspects of the assignment. Most notably, instead of elaborating a single moment, I move from brief moment to brief moment and back and forth in time in a style common to contemporary poetry. I included little dialogue and initially did not worry about significance. In other words, I hit a flow and went with it—which is what I encourage my students to do when they write their essays. At first, my storytelling ended with moving to Pittsburgh, but the essay felt unfinished. I returned to the assignment prompt and realized I had left out significance. I took time to pause and reread what I had written and contemplate the significance and arrived at the question: “What is the connection between knowledge of the MTA Subway system and lesbian love?” From there the flow continued as I began to understand the significance of the narrative is that it performs what is often seen as a problem in the FYW classroom, the oppositional black urban imagination, as a lesbian superpower—a realization I came to by engaging narrative writing as a process of freedom, as I have been learning to do with my students. I write the assignments and as they tell me where they feel confined by the assignment, I change the assignment or encourage them to break the rules. For instance, instead of

teaching narrative as a genre in FYW classes, I teach personal narrative as a process of “describing a memory or set of memories inside our own heads” and give students the freedom to choose what type of styles they want to try out, including an option to create their own (Patterson). To teach writing as a process of freedom, I surrender to my understanding of oppositional poetics as articulated by Erica Hunt. The goal of poetry is not to uphold genre convention but rather to use writing as a tool to break with genre convention, which also teaches us the skills to break with social norms that work to oppress us—our resistance is essential to our survival (Hunt 199).

The same goes for the classroom. The power dynamics of the classroom are only hierarchical in so much as our contracts demand. Particularly in the first-year writing classroom where many students have not yet been disciplined in academic norms, the teaching of writing becomes an opportunity for two-way learning, an exchange of power between student and teacher around difference that does not need to be performed solely in hierarchical ways. The moves that convention would have us think of as student error are actually student resistance to genre and standardization and are a product of freely engaging language’s dynamism. As a teacher, I teach difference from academic expectations as a choice with attendant joys, challenges, and even consequences. As writers and thinkers, student “error” becomes possibility for teachers to learn ways of using language that have not been effectively disciplined. By teachers changing in the confrontation with difference, much the way Bambara, Jordan, Lorde, and Rich did and teach us to do (as further elaborated below in Part III), we can learn from our students the places where our pedagogy oppresses and what needs to change to foster “a praxis that . . . enable[s] us to break free of the epistemological and political stranglehold of late-capitalist antinomies” (Foley 424). To center third world feminism, rather than to treat it as a feature or to tokenize it—as is often the case in much dominant discourse—is a way of breaking convention and shifting paradigms.

## Part III: A Poetics against Standardizing Literacy Narratives

### *A Poetics*

Poetry is the most personal language of experience.

It is how we name what happens to us. It is how we name ourselves. It is how we name our dreams so that others will join in our dreaming. It’s how we name what terrified, and how we exorcise that terror. (Jordan 40)

I teach myself in outline. (Lorde 17)

### *Article 1. Methodology*

*tropicalities. This would be the criticism of desire:  
sowing not reaping.*

—Charles Bernstein

Here is a poetics, a collection of moves growing like wildflowers in our field. I used a simple process to create the outline below. I actively read through the four publications from the archives of Toni

Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, respectively. I initially identified four moves that they had in common: two-way learning; “I” and “we”/individual to community; writing tools/technology; SRTOL. I made a table in a word processing software program and filled in the categories with marginalia and direct quotations from active reading notes. When notes did not fit into any of the initial four moves, I added new categories with an organic stopping point of eleven for the purposes of this essay. I then created the outline below from the table. To elaborate each move, I selected data from the published archives using the table and from contemporary examples from teaching and research using memory.

Data is selected and organized for resonance. Direct quotations are styled in block format without signal phrases. The outline uses standards of universal design to promote accessibility. I hope we find the outline useful for historicizing and futuring efforts to animate our classrooms as sites for continuing our freedom struggles.

*Article II. An Outline of Moves to Transform Heteronormative White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy and Affirm Third World Paradigms Are Enough Leverage to Build Community and Perform Coalition Building Within and Beyond Writing Classrooms*

Section II.01. Two-way Learning

The result of a pedagogical structure that encourages reciprocal transformation in the encounter with difference.

(A) Definition

It was, then, a course with few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing—without a doubt the most difficult kind of course to ‘teach’ for there can be no ‘control’ in the usual pedagogic sense, and without a doubt the most worthwhile kind of educational adventure for it lends itself so easily to two-way learning. (Bambara, “Part II” 2)

(B) Examples of two-way learning:

(1) *Teacher changing readings in response to student feedback:*

But after a long period of silence, one student said, “I don’t know about the others, but I’m tired of living through fiction.” The vigorous nods that accompanied his remark and a phone call I got that night from a student who had absented himself from a few classes who said “identifying with heroes in books is like masturbating” made me take a good look at my previous reading lists and the notes I’ve kept over the years. And I do not exaggerate the case by saying that many a student becomes quickly impatient if not guilty with living vicariously in these times that demand vital and total participation. The wary students find sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writing produced by his fellow classmates. (Bambara, “Part II” 4)

(2) *Student writing essay in response to assignment prompt and final portfolio conference:*

I recently came across an article from the San Francisco weekly called “10 Reasons You Should Come Out of the Closet” by Kate Cogner. The 9th reason really caught my attention; it was titled “The Baby Gays Need You.” I am very surprised that it



isn't a very well known quote because it has so much meaning behind it and I am glad I came across it. Cogner goes on to explain her experience and the first time she saw a lesbian couple; "The first time I ever saw a lesbian couple, I was standing in the hallway on my first day of high school. By that time, I had already experienced so much bullying that I was sure there were no proudly out queer people anywhere on earth (I didn't grow up in San Francisco, obviously). It was like seeing not one unicorn, but two insanely pretty lady unicorns who happened to be snuggling and smitten with each other. It was shocking and life-changing." This quote goes to show how that was a turning point for her because she was able to see that there were queer people out in the open who did not care what others thought about them and they were happy! Many people are very lucky to have that turning point occur in their lives, where they come to a sense of realization of themselves and see that it is okay to be who you are and to love who you love. Unfortunately, I was not exposed to the queer community while I was growing up. I was basically set up to figure it out for myself because there were no openly gay people in my small town. However, although I went through this process the hard way, I still learned and I grew as a person and I am forever grateful for that. I went through the tough process of coming out where it wasn't accepted so that one day, *I* could be someone's "unicorn", *I* could be that person's role model and *I* could change their life for the better and show that them that it is absolutely acceptable to be gay no matter what others may think or believe. (Sierra 4-5)

(3) *Teacher writing essay in response to student essay:*

There is a choreography of movement that New Yorkers have as we navigate the underground network of tunnels. And there are codes of what is acceptable movement and what is not. My father taught us to use the poles as jungle gyms on empty weekend evenings. In high school when I began commuting on a daily basis occasionally there would be a flasher or public masturbator and in the stillness around there was a safety of the knowledge everyone was aware and watching to make sure the boundary that hadn't quite yet been crossed wasn't. In high school I learned to say loudly *do not touch my ass* when men tried to use the crowds as a cover for harassment. I learned the power of public shaming what someone would want private. Growing up knowing how to navigate what the rest of the world sees as dangerous chaos taught and continues to teach me to come out and be out and remain out.

(4) *Dialogic meaning-making with difficult readings*

[L]et me suggest that you offer students whatever books seem urgently relevant to you—for yourself. I do not think it is infinitely preferable to have a student declare that a book is "too hard," than for any of us to presume he is "too young" . . . Childhood is no longer innocent; children are baffled to the point of drug-using desperation. We have already blundered into 1984 and *Brave New World*. Give them



yourselves; what you worry about, what you believe; give them books you are reading, and tell them why you are reading these books. (Jordan 41)

- a) Urgently relevant turn of the 21st Century readings from Patterson FYW syllabi, MSU 2013-2020
- Durielle E. Harris, *Drag* (Elixir Press, 2003); Erica Hunt, “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics” (Roof Books, 1990); Steven Craig Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the History of America’s Troubled Universities* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013); Ann Mantil, Anne G. Perkins, and Stephanie Aberger, “The Challenge of High-Poverty Schools: How Feasible Is Socioeconomic School Integration?” (The Century Foundation Press, 2012); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Duke UP, 2003); Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, *Democracy Now!* (1996-present); Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Utah State UP, 2017); Sheila Maldonado, *One Bedroom Solo* (Fly by Night Press, 2011); Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (Crossing Press, 2007); Rachel Levitsky, *The Story of My Accident Is Ours* (Futurepoem Books, 2013); Dunia Fernandez, “A Conversation of ‘Who Said It Best? The Scientists or the Artists’: On Family and Friends as Happiness” (College Writing I, 2015); Mendi+Keith Obadike *Four Electric Ghosts* (1913 Press, 2011); Sheryl Oring, *Activating Democracy: The “I Wish to Say” Project* (Intellect, 2016); Chloë Bass, “The Question: The Door to What We Most Want to Know” (Intellect, 2016); Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton UP, 2002); June Jordan, *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* (Basic Civitas 2001); Zahra Patterson, *Chronology*, (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018); Naomi Kuo, *Flushing Art Tours #1* (2019); Lena Herzog, *Last Whispers: An Immersive Oratorio* (Peak Performance, 2019); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books, 1993); Tisa Bryant, *Unexplained Presence* (Leon Works, 2006); Tracie Morris, *Who Do With Words* (Chax Press, 2018); Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, and Amy Poehler, *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2018); Fakhair Spence, “[The last writing of me]” (Wesleyan UP, 2016); Valentina Di Liscia, “Shellyne Rodriguez’s Drawings Expand the Definition of ‘Essential Workers’” (Hyperallergic, 2020).

(5) *Teacher transforms administration*

The teacher therefore who is searching for a tightly and fully structured writing program will not find it here. This book is concerned with the orientations and perceptions of teachers in relation to a specific population of student writers. It assumes that programs are not the answers to the learning problems of students but that teachers are and that, indeed, good teachers create good programs, that the best programs are developed *in situ*, in response to the needs of individual student

populations and as reflections of the particular histories and resources of individual colleges. (Shaughnessy 390-91)

(6) *K-12 students transform administration*

It might be helpful to invite 100 children, from the local elementary schools, to come to an assortment of College classes, for one week. Then, perhaps, the participants of the ritual, (politicians, students, faculty, administrators) could assemble themselves, and listen to the children. Let them speak to the implication of the fourth demand. They are the implications. (Jordan 50)

Section II.02. “I” and “We”/ Individual to Community

*At an event at the Brooklyn Museum, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon explains the way songs operated during the marches of the Civil Rights Movement. Gathering for the march we would sing “This Little Light of Mine” as a way to check in and take care of the self. As we start out on the march we would sing “We Shall Overcome.” We take care of the self to prepare for the challenges of collective action.*

(A) Definition

(1) *Collective liberation*

These questions do not prompt the kind of individualism that serves “the interest of capitalist profit system” but rather bring people closer to collective liberation. (Atkins and Brown 3)

(2) *Progression*

No system of values has worth unless it aims to make us better than we are. What do I mean by better? By better I mean for each of us—more who we are. That we develop then from I -> you -> us. (Lorde 34)

(3) *Poetry*

[P]olitical activism and writing generate related forms of power and... poetry hinges on a delicate and necessary relationship between an “I” and a “we.” (Shalev 1)

(B) Sample Assignment

In your daily living

Give 3 examples of actual ways in which you yourself can function to positively counteract racism

Be Specific (Lorde 31)

(C) Importance of bonds

In the fragmented, compartmentalized, often depersonalizing environs of City College, it's possible a long-term approach to the Writing Program would by its very nature become a source of orientation and personal strength for the student. (Rich, “Part I” 32)

Section II.03. Dissolve Boundaries as a Practice of Freedom Essential to Survival: Contemporary Third World Life Studies

(A) Classrooms open portals

(1) *Amongst teacher and students*

Introductory: What we are part of

Classroom as cell—unit—enclosed & enclosing space in which teacher & students are alone together \\  
Can be prison cell commune

trap

junction—place of coming-together

torture chamber

(Rich, “Part I” 15)

(2) *Across disciplines*

[limits of course progression/standardized time] (Rich, “Part I” 30)

[Q program] [cluster teaching] [importance of two-way learning] (Rich, “Part I” 37)

(3) *To the streets*

Lorde tells Rich that, “The learning process is something you can incite, literally, like a riot. And then, just possibly, hopefully, it goes home, or on.” This incitement helps to dissolve the boundaries between the classroom and the streets—raising the stakes of learning to a question of survival. (Atkins and Brown 5)

(4) *To additional realities*

[A] terrifying gap between academic and the real world . . . they did not expect college life to be very real. (Bambara, “Part II” 11)

In short, what happens to the student who cannot or will not operate in the schizophrenic way a “good” student has been trained to, with real life on one hand and academic life on the other? Some leave . . . Some become sleepwalkers. (Bambara, “Part II” 17)

(5) *To the Land of the Dead*

The College dominates a hillside in Harlem—that community the world regards as the metaphor, as well as the living fulcrum, of Black America. The college simply calls itself The City College. And these two, community and school, have formulated a partly unreal theatre about the flesh and bone burial that happens, every day, in the public schools of New York. (Jordan 45)

(B) Processes for Dissolving Boundaries

(1) *Writing*

Your first step in writing should be to make a rough draft in which you get your initial ideas or impressions onto the page. Don’t struggle for corrections in this draft. You will be rewriting several times. Vitality, the flow of your ideas as they come, are the most important things at this point. (Rich, “Part II” 7)

(2) *Life Studies Discipline and Program Ideas*

a) *Mystic arts*

The once impenetrable borders that separated the medical arts from the mystic arts resemble these days a swinging door. (Bambara, “Part I” 49)

b) *Praxis*

[E]xamine the theories in vivo as it were (Bambara, “Part II” 16)

- c) Embodied and experiential knowledge  
The Center would tap the resources in our community and use as instructors those grandmothers, those on the corner hardheads, those students, those instructors, whoever happens to have the knowledge and expertise we desire, regardless of the number of or absence of degrees, publications, titles, honors. (Bambara, “Part II” 21)
- d) Network communications  
The Center could begin then, to set up a network of communications so that one person desiring to set up a course in Caribbean cookery, let’s say, could be put in touch with chefs, caterers, linguists, anthropologists, etc. (Bambara, “Part II” 22)
- e) Urgently Relevant Text (URText)  
Tisa Bryant, Miranda Mellis, and Kate Schatz, *Encyclopedia Vol. 1 A-E*; *Encyclopedia Vol. 2 F-K*; and Tisa Bryant, Miranda Mellis, and Katie Aymar, *Encyclopedia Vol. 3: L-Z*.

(3) *Administration*

- a) Accommodations  
[W]hen, how, why, or in what way the universities would have to shift their focus to accommodate a mass studentry. (Bambara, “Part II” 17)
- b) Community control  
We must make ourselves into a community machine that will eliminate and throw out their political machinery.  
What we have to do, right now, is to create community machines that will collect our garbage, control our schools, and patrol our streets for our safety and not our persecution. (Jordan 33)
- c) Student control  
Take it over: Don’t drop out. Change it. Let us insist that Life Studies, that Black Studies, that Urban Studies become the central parts of the curriculum, Right now. (Jordan 34)

(4) *Content*

- b) Lesbian voices  
[Shifting the center through contemporary texts] (Atkins and Brown 9)
- c) Our realities  
The people in the class and their experiences will be the basic material of the course . . . In writing, we will be trying to define the actual experiences we ourselves are having, and to make others more aware of our reality as we perceive it. (Rich, “Part II” 22)
- d) The melting pot myth  
[A]n elective that will investigate the melting pot myth—in an attempt to find out what effect antagonist national, ethnic, and racial groups have on

the . . . country. (Bambara, “Part II” 28)

e) Language as social control

“In school we do not emphasize the real function of language in our lives: how it operates in courts, in hospitals, in schools, in the media, how it operates to perpetuate a society, maintain a social order, to reflect biases, to transmit basic values.” (Bambara, qtd. in Lavan and Reed 9)

f) Whole wide world of print

I had an indiscriminate appetite for print: bubble gum wrappers, comic books, other people’s post cards. (Bambara, “Part I” 13)

g) Student and community writing

Perhaps librarians could collaborate with teachers or, on an older level, with community leaders toward the establishing of a special section reserved for student and community writings. (Jordan 38)

h) The now

[R]e-constructing a teaching practice that saw the classroom as a collectively composed, gradually crafted commentary on the now. (Atkins and Brown 14)

i) Life Studies

I hope you will insist that your studies shall become Life Studies: Black Studies. Urban Studies. Environmental Studies . . . we who poison ourselves simply by breathing the air, and we who swallow soap and worms, and worse than that, when we drink a glass of water . . . Where are the central, required courses that will teach us how to design and govern cities so that the cities will function as great temples of life that welcome us inside[,] that welcomes our lives? Where are the central required courses that teach us how to destroy the enemy, urban situation that threatens all life now dwelling inside our city walls? (Jordan 32)

(C) We Are Part of Nationwide Cultural Revolution

(1) *Multicultural solidarity*

For a minute, there, mid 1950s, there was multicultural solidarity in community-based action groups . . . (Bambara, “Part I” 54)

(2) *Coalition building is resistance*

That’s been the directive since Cortez and from Cortez through COINTELPRO and up to this minute—keep these people under siege—no coalitions. (Bambara, “Part I” 55)

(3) *International locations*

The traditional meaning of power is inhuman. It is, at all times, intrinsically opposed at least to some human life—whether it is opposed to human life in Birmingham, or in Ocean Hill, or in Harlem, or in Detroit, or in Watts, or in Memphis, or in Augusta, or in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Cambodia, or in Vietnam. —It—the old, abusive

American power is opposed to human life. (Jordan 33)

Section II. 04. Writing Tools/Technology

(A) Pens and paper

(1) *Joy of manual labor*

[description of pens] (Bambara, "Part I" 41)

(2) *Uniformity*

Please use 8 1/2 x 11" ringed-notebook paper for all your work. (Rich, "Part II" 22)

(3) *Choice*

I recall from years of teaching Freshman English that students did noticeably better work once they found tools that suited them . . . I never demanded uniformity of the use-only-this-paper-and-fold-this-way-with-your-name blah blah variety. (Bambara, "Part I" 23)

(4) *Experiment*

[F]ind materials that please and provoke and . . . experiment with new ones. (Bambara, "Part I" 25)

(B) Words

Words are the names of history, minute by minute. (Jordan 44)

(C) Library

(1) *Tool for naming*

I think of the library as a sanctuary from the spectacle, from the alienation, from the unnamed, and the seeming unnameable. (Jordan 39)

(2) *Tool for transforming*

The library has to compete with the movies. Words will have to win that competition. Or, at least, words will have to win their way right up onto the screen, under the imagery of our shown and spreading chaos. Libraries, books, sentences, words will have to supply the subtitles that yield relief, the captions that promise understanding, regardless of what it is we see, *per force*. (Jordan 38)

(D) Writing as a tool

(1) *Rhetorical analysis*

[T]ools which will serve you in all your college courses: the skill to describe, summarize, analyze, support an idea with concrete examples, criticize and evaluate what you read, etc. [rhetorical analysis] (Rich, "Part II" 21)

(2) *Inspire change*

The SEEK classroom became a place where multiple and nonstandard literacies were investigated and respected, and where writing became a tool used to inspire change instead of a skill added to the roster of things students were too often told they "lacked." (kaufman 3)

(E) URText

Mendi+Keith Obadike "American Cypher: Stereo Helix for Sally Hemmings." The sounds

in this work are from a 200 year old bell owned by Sally Hemings and field recording from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. (Obadike)

## Section II.05. Students' Rights to Their Own Language

### (A) A writer teaches you how to read them

No inflections were added, nor any idiomatic usage "corrected." From the habitual and building fluency of their work, the children, spontaneously, became concerned about punctuation, stanzas, paragraphs, and form, generally. Questions about these technicalities were pursued by the children because they wanted to make sure that what they said could not be mistaken, by anybody. (Jordan 29)

### (B) URText

Maria Montaperto "Riding the Wave of 'Students' Right to Their Own Language:' A 2024 Vision." Making Waves, Conference on College Composition & Communication, March 2009, San Francisco, CA.

## Section II.06. Translingualism and Language Justice

It is not only to refine the written equivalent of the oral expression . . . It is also to duplicate on the page what ritual, magic, incantation, and getting happy to do the "normal" state of consciousness. (Bambara, "Part I" 46)

### (A) Translingualism

#### (1) *Representing difference*

The challenge is language. How to avoid lapsing into translationese, parataxis, faux naïf utterances, or any other kind of artificial syntax that so many writers adopt when moving outside of their immediate, native culture. (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

#### a) Solutions

##### i) Limit dialogue

[H]aving less than four lines of actual dialogue, and those are overheards interrupted by the wind. (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

##### ii) Practice

The development of a pitch perfect ear is one of the tasks I assign myself now as new demands of language fluency strike me with an urgency . . . (Bambara, "Part I" 40)

##### iii) Music

[strategy: listen to music from region] (Bambara, "Part I" 45)

##### iv) Study

[strategy:] pay more studious attention to language, rather than the abandonment of African-American experience particularity in favor of some fraudulent "universality." (Bambara, "Part I" 44)

##### v) Ride the subway

[Black translanguaging] (Bambara, “Part I” 45)

(A) Language Justice

(1) *Grammar*

[amazing articulation of how grammar shapes consciousness/worldview] (Bambara, “Part I” 47)

(2) *Magic*

In discussing mystic experiences, psychic awareness, profound spiritual states, for example, we, of course, sound like loons. It is difficult to validate an experience sounding like a loon. No accident. A civilization whose agenda has always been world domination can certainly not afford to have its subjects formulating a technology for living that cannot be State controlled, cannot have subjects calling upon any power that supersedes the state’s. (Bambara, “Part I” 47-48)

(B) Two-way Learning

What exists in the language already that can encourage its users to rise above its limits, freeing us up to perceive in new, and I’m certain, more valid, balanced, harmonizing ways? (Bambara, “Part I” 48)

(C) URText

Zahra Patterson, *Chronology* (Ugly Duckling Presse 2018)

Section II.07. “Confrontation Teaching” and Warrior Pedagogy and Writing

(A) Confrontation teaching

(1) *Bored*

Why bored? Some of us are afraid (Lorde 28)

(2) *Hiding*

The aim of my stumble and error approach, then, is to make the classroom unsafe, to bomb the hiding student out of his corner, to blast the insulating walls down . . . (Bambara, “Part II” 11)

(3) *Cool*

One, we have been conditioned to turn off, short out, be cool; two, we have been often pushed to make something from nothing. (Bambara, “Part II” 27)

(4) *Male privilege*

If this sounds shocking, remember that the loyalties of most male teachers are finally to continuing a system of male privilege and to leaving unquestioned a male tradition in literature. (Rich, “Part II” 32)

(B) Warrior Writing

(1) *Transformation and renewal*

[T]he basic givens from which I proceed. One, we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression is resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown and capitulation, but transformation and renewal. [resilience] (Bambara, “Part I” 36)



(2) *Those who dare*

One has to have or just flat out take permission to be an artist in society that marginalizes, trivializes, and commoditizes (wha?) creative effort . . . This society has rewards for those who demonstrate skills in nimble avoidance of uncomfortable realities that threaten the bogus peace, but no mercy for those who dare penetrate the social garments and speak out on the emperor's clothes. (Bambara, "Part I" 30)

(3) *Desperado*

The combination makes for a peculiar sort of desperado writing some times. Desperado in the Webster sense of outlaw. In the Roget sense of gambler. In the Unamuno sense of deep despair and high hopes. (Bambara, "Part I" 34)

(C) *Warrior Pedagogy*

To obtain a relevant, real education, we shall have to either topple the university or set up our own. (Bambara, "Part II" 18)

Section II.08. Anti-Racist and Good Teaching in Response to Racist Administration

(A) *Good teaching is anti-racist*

(1) *Empowers students*

[A] good teacher provokes rather than assuages, raises questions rather than provides answers, allows the students to discover techniques rather than teaches them, and equips the students with skills so that he can sever ties with the teacher quickly and teach himself. (Bambara, "Part II" 10)

(2) *Critical thinking*

It is no longer possible for an instructor to merely ask the student to study names, dates, events, theories, laws without addressing himself to the contradictions, distortions, inconsistencies, and lies for any number of reasons . . . (Bambara, "Part II" 15)

(3) *Magical thinking*

Of course anything outside this 'lab' was superstition, magic, barbarism, uncivilized. This trend in Western philosophy seems to be symptomatic of the mentality that produced great rationales for racist convictions and imperialist adventures. (Bambara, "Part II" 25)

(4) *Thinking is a physical activity*

[learning dance moves and history of the dance moves] (Bambara, "Part II" 26)

(5) *Teacher, not student, needs remediation*

Our ability to meet the needs of our students, depends to some extent on the remediation of our own education, which in most cases was patchy or inadequate in the above areas. (Rich, "Part I" 21)

(B) *In response to racist administration*

(1) *Racism in K-12*

Many of us worry about the fact that high school is where a tragic majority of Black

and Puerto Rican children drop out of sight: they leave school: because what happens to them in the classroom annihilates their rightful pride, and meets their earnest, real needs with nothing more than irrelevant and contemptuous instruction. (Jordan 31)

(2) *Education is meant to keep our children oppressed*

Today there is nothing wrong with the schools. The schools, as systems of elimination, are working perfectly well, and serving a purpose people should begin to wonder about. (Jordan 49)

(3) *Administrations defund successful anti-racist programs to ensure successful operations of racist systems*

a) Open Admissions and tuition

[T]he impending end of Open Admissions, the impending establishment of tuition requirements are, one and all, racist events that we cannot countenance, nor in any way accept. (Jordan 53)

b) Course loads

[I]t still seems clear that increasing the course load for each teacher is a sure way to undermine and devalue the quality which now exists. What is needed is the will to increase and encourage that quality—for the sake of the College as a whole and for the sake of the students we are purporting to serve. (Rich, “Part I” 22)

c) STIPENDS

There is a disparity between the education you can receive free of financial anxiety and hassles, with leisure for homework . . . WITHOUT STIPENDS FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS . . . A QUALITY EDUCATION IS STILL NOT BEING PROVIDED FOR ALL STUDENTS. (Rich, “Part I” 28)

d) Tokenism

“It will eventually guarantee a kind of tokenism which will admit large numbers of students only to betray and cheat them.” (Rich, qtd. in kaufman 4)

e) Budget

[detailed breakdown and critique of City’s budget] (Jordan 53)

f) Economics

We view the City of New York, and its Economics of People Extinction, as consistent with currently ruling national values, hatred, and demoralization. (Jordan 54)

## Section II.09. Assessment

### (A) Values

(How do you grade wisdom?) (Jordan 46) The wary student finds sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writings produced by his fellow classmates. (Bambara, “Part II” 4)

(B) Critical comments

No grades on papers—students voted against them in favor of critical comments. (Rich, “Part II” 15)

(C) Josh

But I feel they are somewhat prepared for their first English course if their enthusiasm for how and why language issued and what it can effect is anything to go by. (Bambara, “Part II” 8)

(D) Quality of thinking and feeling

Ultimately no piece of writing is going to be better than the quality of thinking and feeling that had led to its writing. This is as true for prison letters as for literacy criticism. (Rich, “Part I” 30)

Section II.10. Writing Styles and Genres in Archives

	Audre Lorde	Toni Cade Bambara	June Jordan	Adrienne Rich
Writing Styles and Genres in Archives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Syllabus</li> <li>• Teaching Journal</li> <li>• Notes that read like a long poem</li> <li>• Course Proposals</li> <li>• Outlines</li> <li>• Excerpt from novel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay in five parts that is itself a type of literacy narrative</li> <li>• Speech</li> <li>• Textual analysis resistant to MLA format</li> <li>• Report</li> <li>• Article</li> <li>• Open Letter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Brief History of a neighborhood</li> <li>• Report</li> <li>• Professional letter</li> <li>• Public Speech with poetry</li> <li>• Graduation Speech</li> <li>• Poem essay</li> <li>• Essay</li> <li>• Statement to Board Heading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memo to Students</li> <li>• Correspondence</li> <li>• Notes</li> <li>• Statements</li> <li>• Report</li> <li>• Glossary</li> <li>• Writing Exercises</li> <li>• Syllabus</li> <li>• Annotated Bibliography</li> </ul>

Section II.11 Places to Diverge

(A) Change in student populations

(1) *Students in 1969*

The students at this college have already indicated that they are weary of being lied to, tired of playing games, damned if they’ll be indoctrinated, programmed, ripped off any longer. (Bambara, “Part II” 15)

(2) *Students after No Child Left Behind and Common Core*

The students at the public university where I teach are earnest and well-behaved, minus some troubling cell phone addictions here and there. They enjoy the challenge of learning how to play games that don’t require electricity together in a classroom and appreciate pedagogy that provides a critical lens for analyzing the possibility that they are being “indoctrinated, programmed, and ripped off” as they go deeper in debt

as our campus becomes more diverse. They write brilliant essays analyzing television shows, movies, music videos, video games, and novels for deeper meaning after studying literary/film criticism. They thrive in well-structured and kind pedagogies of freedom and value our library field trips to learn how to take a book out of and navigate the stacks.

- (3) *Students Fall 2020*  
Yet to be known.

## Conclusion

As we engage the above poetics to enrich our pedagogy, the most important takeaway is to resist teaching the literacy narrative as a genre. To do so gets in the way of the liberatory work it wants to accomplish. Our poetics outlines strategies for two-way learning in composition classes to transform the university while historicizing the approach in 1960s and 1970s Harlem. This dynamic historical moment that is foundational to many FYW commonplaces has a lot to teach us in 2020 when similar historical forces are afoot and as many universities continue the patterns of defunding FYW programs as student populations become more diverse and need more individual support from their writing instructors. At the same time, calls for anti-racist social justice reform can literally be heard on our streets.

Proper support for doing our work is essential. When FYW directors and teachers are fighting university policies that undermine the ability to support their students, it takes a toll on the workers' bodies. Mina Shaughnessy, director of SEEK, died of stomach cancer at the age of 54 in 1978. That was the same year Audre Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer, which later spread to the liver and led to her death in 1992 at the age of 58. Toni Cade Bambara died of colon cancer in 1995 at the age of 56. June Jordan died of breast cancer in 2002 at the age of 65. Adrienne Rich died due to complications from rheumatoid arthritis in 2012 at the age of 83. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs scathingly points out, "An institution knows how to preserve itself and it knows that Black feminists are a trouble more useful as dead invocation than as live troublemakers, raising concerns in faculty meetings" ("The Shape of My Impact").

At the time of this writing in July 2020, due to the enormous mishandling of a global pandemic by the federal government under the administration of the 45th president, universities are making investments in technology and cuts to labor that may have the most damaging impact to our FYW programs and our libraries—foundations for student literacy and essential for addressing the racist education and economic policies many of our students live through—while at the same time university and department statements on anti-racism proliferate.

Now is the time for all of us with social justice and anti-racist agendas (in word *and* action) to historicize our composition pedagogies within: economic policies of free tuition, student stipends, small classes, polyphonic cohorts of full-time instructors with contracts that can resist budgetary whims of corporate consulting companies, manageable course loads, and curricula that allow our students to change our perspectives as we continue to change theirs. The future is ours to shape.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Tracie Morris, *Who Do With Words: (a blerd love tone manifesto)* (Chax Press, 2018) for a text that reads J. L. Austin through lenses of Black poetics and performance.

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

Beth Buyserie Utah State University

## KEYWORDS

bisexual literacies; later-in-life literacies; queer literacies;  
bisexual erasure and invisibility; survival; sexual fluidity

**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).

***“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.”***

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*, Anel 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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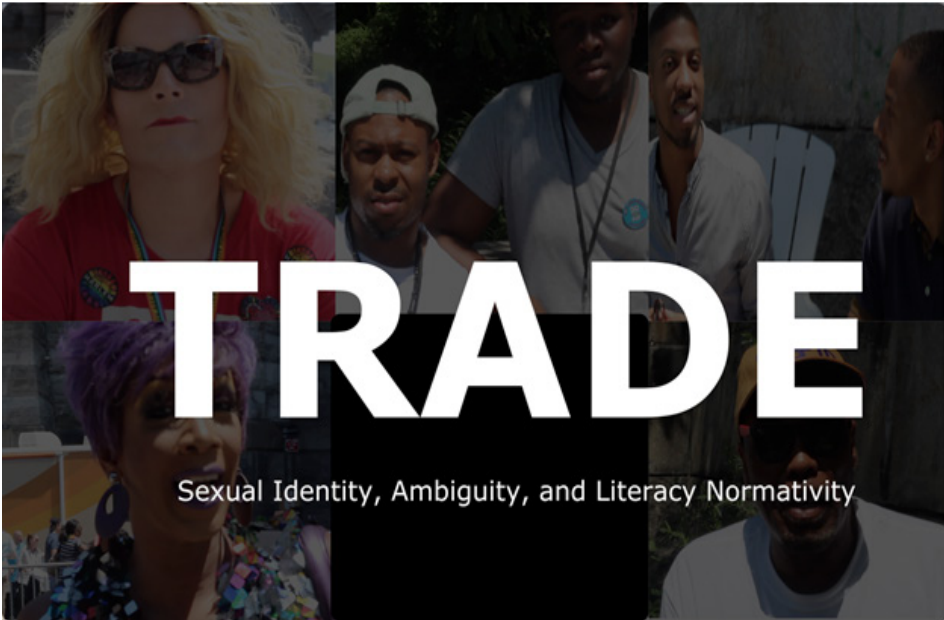
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Seth E. Davis

Chance: “What is wrong with us Black gay men?”

Noah: “It’s not just Black men. . . . Gay men in general seem to idolize these hypermasculine ideals. For us, it’s homo-thugs. For white queens, it’s the college jock Abercrombie types. . . . We’ve become completely invested in aping hetero-identities.

Alex: “It’s all so boring. Just give me a big ole queen any day!”  
—“Don’t Make Me Over,” *Noah’s Arc*, 2005

**S**traight people don’t know shit about sexuality. Often, the ways in which the dominant (i.e. heteronormative) culture understands sexuality and orientation work to cover up the realities of what is actually going on in people’s sexual lives. For example, sexuality is typically understood through pathologies based on heteronormative ideals. Sexual orientations such as gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer are often questioned and stigmatized in contrast to heterosexuality. Any suggestion that someone is queer, especially if they are male, suggests that what you have been led to believe up until this point is untrue if you did not already know about their queerness. Heterosexuality is treated as normal, understood, and validated by active relationships and children.

For many Black and Brown men in particular, there is often a resistance to engage with experiences

that complicate static ideas of sexual orientation and identity. Specifically larger homophobic and effemiphobic forces inspire many men to resist femme, bottom, or queer personas in casual and professional spaces for fear of being harassed, ostracized, or not seen as sexually attractive. The resistance to identifying as gay, queer, or femme, however, does not keep these men from engaging in queer activity. *Trade* is a term Black queer people use to refer to these men. By using the term trade, I am not attempting to offer another sexual orientation, but rather I use the term as an invitation to denaturalize normative understandings of sexual orientation and practice.

Some of my favorite naive-straight-people comments when talking about men are “He ain’t gay. He got kids”; “He ain’t gay. He married”; and “He ain’t gay. He Jamaican.” All of these are ways people use heteronormative scripts to argue that a man could not possibly engage in sex with a man or transwoman. For me, it is a given that these men are not “gay” as in out of the closet or gay politically to combat homophobia. We would not be having this conversation if that were the case. What the naive straight person means is that there is no way this man could have any sexual experiences with men because their understanding of heterosexuality in particular and sexuality more broadly does not allow room for it. Adrienne Rich discusses this as “compulsory heterosexuality.” In her seminal essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence,” Rich discusses how the heteronormative script functions as a theoretical stumbling block for many straight people because “lesbian experience has been written out of history or catalogued under disease” (13). This erasure is manifested in larger ignorances (and supposed ignorances) that straight culture has around sexuality. At the same time, the erasure of queer people and knowledges also allow straight or straight-passing people the freedom to experiment with queer sex without the stigma of homophobia and suspicion from the dominant culture. Straight people’s assumptions about the naturalness of heterosexuality, the legibility of queerness, and the awfulness of homophobia also contribute to this ignorance about queer sexuality being normalized.

In this article, I use my ethnographic research from Harlem (SGL/LGBTQ) Pride 2017 to critically engage with the discourse around trade amongst Black gay men and transwomen. Much of their feedback coincided with my 2013 Washington DC Black Pride research on *shade*, where my participants saw shade and the interviews themselves to speak back to, to riff off of, or to correct dominant scripts about Black queer people. I asked the participants about their understanding and experiences with trade, and I found that they knew all about how dominant/heteronormative sexual scripts often worked to obscure queer realities and their experiences with straight men. I argue that the ideas captured in these interviews represent a literacy because three concepts came up over and over again that also circulate in academic, pop culture, and my personal discourses.

The three themes that emerged are:

- (1) “Trade as a sexual literacy”: The participants’ comments suggest that to know the slang term, the men themselves, or why the term exists in the culture complicates a simply heteronormative view of the world;
- (2) “The Truth about Straight Men”: The participants’ comments work to correct normative understandings of straight men and their sexual practices; and
- (3) “More than Tops and Bottoms”: The participants comments work to correct assumptions

about preferred sexual practice based on gender performance.

My participants often used personal stories, anecdotes, and or jokes to take me into moments where gender and/or sexuality were functioning in ways straight folks might not expect.

## Methodology: Fierce Literacies, Recruiting Participant, Research Site, and Interview Protocol

My work is informed by understanding literacy as embodied, as a way of being and moving through the world. I define fierce literacies as a “type of counter consciousness that allows Black queer people or ‘the girls’ to riff off of static ideas of language and literacy both to communicate with and to create community amongst friends” (Davis 58.) I am also building off of work by Prior and Shipka that encourages scholars to look beyond just alphabetic text when critically engaging with literacy. This project recognizes that amongst close friends, “the girls” often share sexual narratives about sleeping with straight men and speak back to dominant heteronormative scripts or pathologies about sexuality. As with my research on shade, I use the term “the girls” to discuss individuals in the Black queer community: Black transfolk, gay men, lesbians, and non-Black queer people who navigate the same spaces and engage in the same literacy practices. “The girls” is a slang term in the LGBTQ community for gay folk, and I also use it to honor the relationship (and shared oppression) between Black ciswomen, transwomen, and gay men that often exists.

I refer to the stories, anecdotes, and jokes as *literacy narratives* because they point to sexual experience as a site of knowledge. I build on Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetart’s understanding of literacy narratives as an ethnographic method to engage with individual and cultural identity, as well as rites of passage (647). When I use the term literacy hereafter, I also build on Jonathan Alexander’s work on sexual literacies, as expressed in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice*. Specifically, Alexander argues that the stories we tell about sex and sexuality are central to who we are individually, collectively, and politically. Alexander’s emphasis on the importance of stories in community making is in line with how I see stories working in Black queer communities. I consider pullin’ trade as a fierce sexual literacy, and I see the narratives and anecdotes presented below functioning the same way in the sense that they move one’s gaze to that of Black queer people, forcing the reader to (re)see the world around them an began to understand a literacy that is often hiding in plain sight.

While attending the festival, I recruited participants by enacting snowball sampling. Similar to how cliques work outside of research contexts, the participants introduced me to their friends, who were invited to participate as well. I recruited participants who had knowledge about trade as a Black queer term and who were openly gay or trans. I interviewed eight queer people, and each interview lasted between three and ten minutes. I interviewed four of the participants in pairs (Courtney & Victor, and Jason & Oreill) and four individually (Harmonica, Giana, Ashley, and Joseph),<sup>1</sup> and all interviews took place at Harlem Pride, which is a Harlem-specific Pride festival organized and geared toward queer people of color. Harlem Pride began in 2010 as a party and art exhibit. It is also

a part of the larger history of LGBTQ Pride festivals that date back to the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the subsequent protests and festivals that sparked the modern LGBTQ rights movement. I picked Harlem Pride as my research site because it is unique in the fact that it is heavily populated by and geared toward “the girls” who would be familiar with the language and culture.

Due to my memberships in the various Black and gay communities, I have multiple and layered relationships with the people in the spaces I study. Thus, I used existing relationships or pinpointed other Black queer people to implant myself temporarily into small discourse communities and flesh out trade as a literacy. I met Victor, who would connect me with many of my participants while attending Tennessee State University, a historically Black university in Nashville. At the time of the interview, Victor did work with pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and sexual health in the queer community. For these reasons, I knew that he was aware of larger heteronormative forces that inform many Black men’s sexual practices and Black queer cultural understanding of sexuality. Victor introduced me to his friends and colleagues Courtney, James, and Oreill. This was valuable because I was able to talk to Black queer people in conversation with their peers and watch them work to define trade together based on common experiences. I met Joseph by walking up to him at the festival while he was being interviewed by the local news. He introduced me to Ashley, who is white but sees herself as part of the Black queer community, and she introduced me to Giana. I also already knew Harmonica, a well-known drag queen, through a friend from graduate school. Each of the participants knew about trade as a Black queer happening and was either a Black queer or was introduced to me by a Black queer person.

I asked the participants to tell me what they thought trade was, how it was used in the Black queer community, and in what ways did they see gender performance playing a role in how they read Black men. The participants clearly teased out their knowledge about trade as a counter knowledge, or as I call it, a fierce literacy, specific to Black queer people, that runs counter to dominant understandings of sexuality. Several of the participants would either preface or end statements by pointing to common assumptions or misconceptions only to speak what they saw as the real truth rather than the easy or obvious truths that some have been led to believe. I see this ability to read and share truths against dominant scripts as a *fierce literacy*. The participants saw their feedback as filling a void in mainstream discourse about sex. Specifically, there are a lot of media texts and academic discourse about the stigma of being read as queer rather than the experience or knowledge that comes from living a queer life. I have critically engaged with the topic of trade at bars and in living rooms with friends, the work of scholars who discuss sexuality and passing in the Black community, and my participants’ feedback during interviews. These conversations have helped me understand why trade has particular traction in the Black community.<sup>2</sup> These three research questions informed my research:

- (1) How is/are trade understood in the Black queer community?
- (2) What do stories about trade help us understand about sexual literacies and how they are reproduced more largely?
- (3) How do stories about trade speak back to commonsense literacies of sexual performance tied to gender?



In answering these questions, I see the truths I present in this article as empowering mandates and yet as basic and commonsense. I found that participants repeatedly engaged in the fierce literacy practice of citing heteronormative notions of sexuality often to deconstruct them and narrate their own experiences. Even though Harlem Pride can be understood as a Black queer space, the participants' comments speak to the multiple ways Black queer people create identity and share knowledges in conversation with larger white supremacist and heteronormative forces.

## Trade as a Fierce Literacy

To understand trade as a fierce literacy is to understand that it has always been common knowledge within the queer community that straight men occasionally like to sleep with gay men and transwomen when they think no one will find out. For example, in *Gay New York*, George Chauncey writes that queer prostitutes used the term as early as the early 1900s for the male customer of a "fairy" (gay or trans) prostitute, and the term would later be used by many to describe any man who has any sexual interaction with queer people (70). I was somewhat shocked to find out that the term *trade*, as I understood it, was that old. However, I knew that the phenomenon itself was far from new. I am more interested in how Black queer people understand a larger sexual matrix that is often erased by normative discussions of sexual identity and experience. Specifically, E. Patrick Johnson's "Snap! Culture" and Eric Darnell Pritchard's "This is Not an Empty-Headed Man in a Dress" critically engage with the literacies and experiences of Black queer people who push back against homophobia, and normative understandings of literacy, or what Pritchard termed "literacy normativity," to survive.

Chris Bell's chapter "I'm Not the Man I Used to Be" from *Sex and Disability* serves as an exemplar of how to use personal narrative to move the reader beyond normative understandings of sexuality and HIV status disclosure. Bell places his sexual narratives in conversation with contemporary discourses around Black men who have been incarcerated for not disclosing their HIV status. Specifically, Bell narrates several moments picking up male prostitutes, where there is no discussion of whether the guy is straight, nor do these events take place in "gay" spaces. In some narratives, there is barely any discussion at all due to a language barrier. Bell writes himself as not fearless but courageous as he navigates homophobic spaces to procure sex from trade. His narratives also run consistent with other narratives from "the girls" where the emphasis is on masculinity as sexy and trade's resistance to being read as gay. Each of these research projects focus on Black queer sexuality and lived experience as knowledge. In this project, I am interested in how "the girls" make sense of the homophobic and often contradictory messages that circulate in our culture around trade, while still loving and fucking these men.

The fetishization of masculinity in the Black community is at the heart of trade as a literacy. Much research has been done on how the masculinities and sexualities of straight Black men are often misread by mainstream culture and based on white supremacist scripts, including Ronald Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, Vershawn Ashanti Young's *Not Your Average Nigga*, and David Kirkland's *A Search Past Silence*. Each of these works include narratives where Black men (and boys) discuss disdain toward being read as effeminate and/or queer, while this disdain is placed



within a larger history of Black male oppression and literacy. These discussions of larger ambivalence to being read as or stigmatized for being queer tells part of our experience as Black folk. However, there are also Black queer people who have embraced their queer sexualities, otherness, and/or femininity not without trial but with pride.

I see the participants in this way. The participants are often gregarious and larger than life in their telling of stories to do an on-the-spot critique of what the listener thinks they know. Friends and close acquaintances, regardless of race and gender, often share sexual stories to counsel or to bond. I believe that calling attention to Black queer people's stories illuminates points of view and knowledges that may otherwise be unheard. Having knowledge about men who exist within perceived gray areas of sexuality often creates discursive communities within and outside of the Black queer community. Also, passing for straight, or as trade, has a specific cultural capital in the lives of Black men and can often be necessary to one's survival. The ability to pass for straight or to be seen as attractive to straight men is often privileged in many gay groups and spaces. For these reasons, sex stories about virginity loss and hooking up with straight men are often the stories that are circulated and reproduced the most amongst "the girls."

In my research on shade—verbal/nonverbal sparring specific to the "the girls"—I engage it as a fierce literacy in the sense that the practice speaks back to common readings of language or gesture to create new meaning, critique, and entertainment (58). Here, I connect trade as a literacy to this larger fierce literacy framework, tracing the roots of the term's use and explicating its currency within the Black queer community. Passing for straight is a privilege or a dilemma that I do not have. There

***“I argue that trade as a literacy would have more traction in oppressed and poor communities where gender performances are more scrutinized by the white straight dominant culture. Essentially, we are talking about survival. Like with shade, it is the Black queer experience that gives trade complexity and meaning.”***

is no stage in life since elementary school where it has not been clear to me that I was read as queer by my peers, friends, and family. At the same time, I cannot say that every single person I have ever met assumed I was gay either. I regularly enjoy gay bars, clubs, bathhouses, balls, sex parties, house parties, feminist discussion groups, pride festivals, and spaces that encourage sexual and queer liberation.

At the same time, I navigate spaces that are read/understood as straight, including the church, fraternity, and even academia more largely. This discussion of trade makes the slippages between seemingly straight and queer spaces more salient outside of the Black queer community.

I argue that trade as a literacy would have more traction in oppressed and poor communities where gender performances are more scrutinized by the white straight dominant culture. Essentially, we are talking about survival. It is the Black queer experience that gives trade complexity and meaning. To suggest that a heterosexual persona is coveted just because it is sexy is to ignore the very real history of homophobia in hiring practices and the ongoing street violence that many Black queer people face day to day. Trade as a literacy occupies the space between cultural/Black/queer

literacies and sexual/queer literacies. In their stories of pullin' trade, Black queer people illuminate the messiness of how we often understand sexual identity and performance as static. Pullin' trade also reminds us of how space and context inform how we understand these things to function. The practices of telling narratives about pullin' trade serve as a sexual literacy and rite of passage into those communities for Black gay men and transwomen. In listening to these narratives, I find myself asking: Why does the term have such resonance in the Black community? Storylines on shows such as FX's *Pose*, OWN's *Greenleaf*, Showtime's *P-Valley*, BET's *Twenties* and the public narratives of famous Black queer people such as Angelica Ross, Lil Nas X, Laverne Cox, and Janet Mock have brought more attention to this phenomenon and how many transwomen are murdered by trade or down-low (DL) men because those men cannot deal with their attraction to transwomen.

## The “Truth” About Straight Men: Defining Trade and DL

Sex appeal and masculinity was at the core of all the participants' descriptions of who trade was and how they looked. In “Snap! Culture,” Johnson describes trade as “handsome and *extremely* masculine” (128, italics in original). These two descriptors speak to the idea that the performance of masculinity and perceived heterosexuality is sexually enticing. However, trade's mere presence in queer contexts, like a gay club or a gay man's bedroom, complicates the idea of heterosexuality as a static identity or performance. In Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano's *The Joy of Gay Sex*, interactions with trade often reify heteronormative notions of masculinity, signifying heterosexuality and physical dominance:

Someone straight and potentially dangerous called *rough trade*. Hustlers are known as commercial trade. Both terms naturally connote danger. Two constants emerge: He who is “trade” plays the straight role, and the sex is geared toward his climax, not to mutual orgasm. (287)

While I acknowledge that the authors' description of trade is a little sensational, it points toward this larger fetishization of heterosexuality and masculine personas in the face of homosexual activity. I see connections between Felice and Silverstein's concept of trade and Pritchard's concept of literacy normativity in the sense that they both speak to how gender/sexual customs and literacies specific to the West often have authority and are read as correct.

Within the Black community and in the larger culture, the idea that heterosexuals are people who have sex with members of the opposite sex and that homosexuals are people who have sex with same sex erases the lived experiences and realities of self-identified straight men who have or continue to engage in sex with gay men and transwomen. This erasure works to the benefit of men who want to keep that part of their lives a secret. Thus, compulsory or normative understandings of sexual orientation keep people from being able to see these realities and this contributes to literacy normativity. Specifically, knowing participants pull trade complicates the idea of a masculine performance signifying a heterosexual orientation, one that is resistant to homosexual activity. As a fierce literacy, the phrase “pullin' trade” also playfully signifies off fishing, or the idea that there is a gravity-like pull some gay men and transwomen seem to have that makes straight men not so

straight. The phrase suggests that sexual identity is not static and is informed by our experiences and the people we meet. In order to understand pullin' trade as rites of passage that almost all queer people experience, we have to understand the identity or designation of straight as not permanent or mutually exclusive when it comes to engaging in homosexual activity.

In the early 2000s, the phrase DL would come to describe Black men who have sex with men while performing heterosexual personas in other parts of their lives. The archetype of the “down low brotha,” an otherwise good Black man who has unprotected sex with men and women, became the scapegoat for higher HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women. Formerly used to describe undercover sexual escapades of any kind, “On the Down Low” became a phrase to signify queer possibility and the personal anguish of a “straight man.” The DL gained mainstream attention through the 2004 publication of J. L. King's *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep with Men* and King's subsequent appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. This was followed by Terry McMillan's appearance on the show in which she discussed her relationship with a Down Low man. In addition, E. Lynn Harris novels and countless DL storylines on shows like *Girlfriends*, *Will & Grace*, and *Law & Order SVU* would play a role in cementing the DL in mainstream discourse. Works such as Keith Boykin's 2005 book *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America* and Jeffrey McCune's 2014 *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* tease out the DL phenomena as not specific to just Black men and not responsible for escalating HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women, but the DL man continues to be viewed as a social pariah. Inspired by McCune and Boykin's work, I think research like this encourages people to have more pragmatic, rather than just compulsory, conversations about sexuality and sexual health.

That said, there may be a slight but wavering difference between DL men and trade. Down low men are invested in giving the appearance of heterosexuality while also having sex with men in private. However, *trade* are straight men who are two steps away from gay activity, who do not necessarily self-identify as gay. The former is based on a lie: “I'm straight. I never have sex with men,” while the latter is most often based on an assumption: “I'm not gay but if I were, you'd be the one.” However, neither trade nor DL men are typically comfortable with being commonly understood as same-gender attracted. Some out gay men self-identify as trade, but most of the time, the term is used to talk about a straight man who “will go.” It must be understood that these phrases overlap, and many people use them interchangeably. For example, later on in this article, two of the participants, Courtney and Victor, discuss trade as contemporary and DL as outdated.

I also want to be clear that trade and bisexuality/pansexuality are not necessarily the same. One who self identifies as bisexual or pansexual claims their queer or non-normative sexual identity. In contrast, trade as a *designation* speaks to our understanding of sexual identity politics. For example, I was labeled gay by my peers long before I understood myself to be gay. Similarly, trade, as a term and an identity, is projected *onto* men by Black queer people. While DL represents sexual identity being hidden, trade speaks to an identity in flux. The participants define the term in a similar manner but also work to complicate heterosexuality and masculinity by telling truths about men based on knowledges and experiences specific to Black queer life. Thus, when the participants discuss trade, trade falls into two categories: 1) men who identify as straight but dabble (or have dabbled) in queer

sexual practices and 2) gay men who purposely or consequently present as straight.

As their responses show, pullin' trade is an on-the-spot literacy, similar to reading and throwing shade, in the sense that it is not a static reading of people or situations but one informed by the material context. Specifically, participants' responses demonstrate that trade/pullin' trade as literacy is not as much about the trade themselves as the knowledge that they exist, which runs counter to heteronormative ideas of sex and sexuality.

## Participants on Trade

Joseph was one of the first participants I interviewed. He stuck out at the festival because he was wearing an Omega Psi Phi fraternity hat. I am a member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, another NPHC/ "Divine 9" organization, so the letters stuck out to me. In Black college and Greek life, Que Dogs, members of this fraternity, are often looked at as hyper-masculine. I have even gotten into arguments with members of this fraternity about whether or not they have gay members. For this reason alone, I would consider Joseph trade in my world. So, when I saw him being interviewed by a news crew at Harlem Pride, I knew I had to talk to him as well. I started the interview with the question, "What is trade?"

Like many of the other participants, Joseph sees trade as tied to masculinity or at least a dissociation from femininity. He says: "Trade is intended to be those brothers who were messing around with gay men but didn't want to associate with us on a regular basis." The common theme that connects every participant's discussion of trade is that they—that is, *trade*—are straight masculine men who have sex with gay men and transwomen. Courtney, on the other hand, discusses trade as mysterious unicorns in the sense that people do not think they exist, which adds to their allure. He points to a sense of mystery or the unknown as central to his understanding of trade. He goes on to mention several forms of trade including "Bum Trade," "Dirty Dick Trade," and "Regular Trade," which suggests that there's not one type of trade and that participants knew it when they saw it. In a Black queer context, trade is used as a masculine signifier and as a term for sex work. Even though all of my participants had similar thoughts on how trade is understood today, a couple of the participants also discussed how the meaning of trade has changed over time.

For example, Harmonica states that the definition of trade has expanded, and she thinks now people throw it around. Similar to shade, trade becomes a catch-all and stands in for sexual attractiveness. Ashley heard the term more often in her twenties (the 2000s) than she hears it today. She explains: "The term trade has slowed down from when I was younger and even in the last five years." I don't have any empirical data to support this, but I have peeped this too. I think it is related to the increased visibility of Black queer people in the media. Similar to Joseph, Courtney describes trade as masculine. "You might not even know if they're gay but you look at them and be like 'Oh, that's trade.'" In this statement, Courtney suggests that the man's sexual orientation is unknown yet also suggests an ability to tell one's propensity to engage queer sexual activity. Courtney is discussing an on-the-spot, situated read/understanding of sexuality. He deliberately avoids normative notions of masculinity like chopping wood or playing baseball and instead suggests that he reads masculinity

and potential queerness in men intuitively from how they carry themselves and the context. There is no one way that a man can carry himself that would make sure that he is read straight in all contexts or gay in all contexts. However, normative straight culture works hard to convince us that there are right ways to be a man, which are often informed by nationality, race, religion, etc. While Courtney and Victor may have different reads on who they perceive to be trade, what is more telling is that they/we have a common thought process of how to discern trade and that we know this reading runs counter to how straight people think.

Many people in the Black queer community also tie their understanding of trade back to early definitions of the term. For example, Ashley describes regular harassment that she has received as a white transwoman, what Silverstein and Picano call commercial trade:

When I walk down the street, I get accosted by (teenaged) young men of color looking for not just sex but money. To them their penis sells. They know they're young and will attract whatever crowd, and they don't even think of it as gay or not gay. They just think money.

Them too are considered trades because they're hustlers. They're just tricks of the trade.

In this scenario, masculinity is a commodity to be sold. As in previous comments, Ashley speaks about trade as masculine and suggests that trade do not see sex with men or transwomen as gay in and of it itself, nor do they believe that it signifies a gay sexual orientation. Instead, their focus is on the money that is being exchanged during the interaction. In the words of Method Man, "Cash rules everything around me. Cream. Get the money. Dolla, dolla bills y'all." Exchanges like these are why the term trade can easily be connected to commerce.<sup>3</sup> Joseph describes commercial trade as "exactly that. I'm willing to do such and such in exchange for . . ."—he calls attention to bartering as a part of pullin' trade. These exchanges are not always about full on sexual intercourse for monetary rewards. Sometimes they are about bartering for food, shelter, acceptance and/or career advancement. However, when I asked friends Victor and Courtney the difference between trade and DL, they stated that they see trade as more current than DL:

Victor: I think DL is a played-out term.

Courtney: I also think DL is a played-out term, but I won't negate that they exist. One trade might not necessary be gay, but if he is, it doesn't mean he's DL. He's just not going around saying 'Oh, I'm gay.' DL, they not telling nobody....

Courtney points to the overlap between DL and trade. Both identities help tease out that there are larger forces and politics at work, including but not limited to sexual practices, that lead people to claim the sexual orientations they do. In such cases, engaging in same-sex sexual activity does not necessarily influence men to adopt public queer sexual identities. In contrast, I identify as gay for political and sexual reasons. I believe that my queer representation helps fight homophobia and signals to other men that I'm down for a good time. However, that is not everyone's goal. Most people are just trying to survive and don't have time for the politics of sexuality or the stigma of homosexuality.

The participants understand trade/pullin' trade as a phrase specific to the Black queer community and experience. I offer "pullin' trade" to rhetoric and composition as a way to engage with the complex ways that masculinity and sexual identity are read and performed. Pullin'

trade represents a larger sexual/gender literacy that demonstrates how masculinity or perceived heterosexuality are often read as sexual ideals. Jason first saw the term used in Black Gay Yahoo chatrooms he navigated as a teenager. Even though she is white, Ashley sees trade as a Black gay term used to describe primarily Black and Latino men. However, she feels it is necessary to state that these men exist in white communities as well:

If you go to some neighborhoods in Louisiana or Minnesota where it is all white people, there are trades there. . . To them because they're on the top scene and are the ones doing the screwing, they don't consider it gay. It has become an urban terminology that I have learned in the Black community.

Ashley, Jason, and the other participants see trade/pullin' trade as a situated knowledge, or, as I have argued, a literacy specific to the Black queer community. However, one of the controversies of the DL media spectacle of the early 2000s was the suggestion that Black men were the only ones who were secretly sleeping with men while maintaining public relationships with women. While I acknowledge that men of color often feel more pressure to live up to arbitrary masculine benchmarks, Ashley's acknowledgment of white trade is very important in understanding that trade (the people) exist everywhere. Even relationships between lesbians and cisgender "straight" women function in similar ways. For example, the LUG—"Lesbian Until Graduation"—trope speaks to how often college is seen as a progressive space where "straight" women can try on a lesbian identity and take it off in the "real world" when it may not be acceptable anymore.

Lastly, the notion of trade as subjective was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Several of the participants mention that their understanding of trade is individual and situated. Courtney, for example, mentions that he and his friends periodically disagree about who is trade: "One of my friends thinks another one of my friends is trade, and I'm like 'that's a lady.'" Courtney's comments suggest that there is not a common understanding of masculinity within the Black queer community. However, trade is still understood in contrast to a femme persona. Similar to Courtney, Joseph disagrees with his gay-children about who is trade based on femininity. He suggests that our understanding of trade has evolved: "A lot of my kids—I look at the guys they find attractive and go [tilting his head], 'Okay?!?' Some of the guys that I know for a fact topped them, I look at them like... [tilts head]—'Okay?!?'"

Joseph takes on a sarcastic tone to suggest that he questions his gay-children's readings of their partners as trade. Since he sees these men as feminine, he concludes they are not trade. While a lot of this discussion has been about what trade is and is not, I see trade as really about ambiguity. Anyone who is not obviously legible as gay is trade and yet the fact that they are in question at all says that a straight identity may not be so legible. Any gay person can be and may be read as trade by someone. However, I cannot have a discussion about trade without acknowledging the fact that queer people (especially trans people) are regularly targets of violence because a homophobic culture can read them as queer. We must acknowledge that even some straight people have been victims of homophobia because they were read as queer. Then there are all the ways that straight people have bullied each other and taught their kids how to look and act straight even when no one queer was around.<sup>4</sup> With that being said, the participants' comments both acknowledge common and often

institutionalized literacies about sexuality while simultaneously speaking back to and rewriting these literacies to create space for their truths. Next, I engage with how literacies about trade denaturalize the conflation of gender performance with sexual behavior.

## More Than Just Tops and Bottoms

This section focuses on how fierce literacies of pullin' trade speak back to normative ideas of tops and who bottoms during anal sex. The most consistent theme in our discussion engaged who masculine men are and what sexual practices they engage in based on larger Black queer communal knowledges. In his discussion of Black queer people and undesirability, Pritchard discusses how literacy normativity informs our ideas of what is sexually enticing:

Those holding normative standards of beauty, body, and gender attain more power within a public that places so much value and attention on physical appearance and normative masculinity and femininity. Accordingly, others are seen as having less value based on those same standards. Those notions reign over the social experiences of the everyday and permeate every facet of lived experience, including at work, at school, in families, among friends, and online. (*Fashioning Lives* 195)

These normative understandings of masculinity and femininity as diametrically opposed exist everywhere in heteronormative/dominant culture. So, it makes sense that this informs how Black queer people see sexuality. However, my participants also speak back to and rewrite these literacies. They speak back to effemiphobia in Black gay culture and deconstruct sexual and gender identity as tied to behavior. Lastly, the participants discuss how men's gender performances influence their sex appeal. While they were aware of larger readings of gender that render femininity as undesirable and masculinity as appealing, many of my participants went out of their way to tell stories and present scenarios that suggest that these static ways of understanding sexuality were not the norm in their community.

In a lot of ways, trade is defined in opposition to what is considered a butch queen or stereotypical gay man. Joseph states that there has always been a heteronormative and gendered division amongst Black queer people. He explains: "The girls were the girls and the boys were the boys. The trade were the boys, and the girls were the more feminine men." Later on, I asked Joseph if he thought trade or the privileging and fetishization of masculinity was a problem in the Black queer community. He explained that he does not see it as a negative thing, but what he does have a problem with is the effemiphobia in the community:

It seems to be that the more effeminate men are looked down upon. They're seen in a negative light. But like I always tell people, like people told me coming up, it was the more effeminate men (and transwomen) that started the Stonewall Riot. It was those people who were tired of being treated less than while the more masculine/trade-y guys [making air quotes] who wanted to fade into the background and let the police do the things that they were doing to us.

Here, we see Joseph challenging dominant understandings of effeminate men, challenging the



belief that effeminate men are weak. Joseph references the heroic effort of Black transwomen activists like Marsha P. Johnson, Silvia Rivera, Miss Major, and many others in starting the Stonewall Riots, which would lead to the creation of June Pride festivals everywhere, including in Harlem. Specifically, it was both her identity as a transwomen and many other queer people's inability to blend in with heterosexual society that led them to the front lines to fight on behalf of the LGBTQ community.

Oreill uses a scenario that happened earlier that day at Harlem Pride as an example of how effemiphobia functions in the Black queer community.

During the parade, I was standing there with African American (gay) men and these two femme Black dudes walked by and one had on a crop top. The other group was like 'Eww! That's so gross! Why can't they just be men' and I was like that is so messed up to argue that [based off what they are wearing]...

In this example, it is clear that even gay prides are not necessarily safe spaces for men or transwomen to be themselves. Queer people's knowledges of trade trouble the idea of gay versus straight spaces. For the one group of men, femininity runs counter to what they see as acceptable in men. However, Oreill speaks back to this stance in his comments.

When I asked Harmonica if she felt trade had privilege in the Black queer community, she says they do because we let them. Harmonica discusses how gay men and transwomen will raincheck plans they have with their friends in order to hook up with trade:

Some people will cancel their plans with you because trade coming over. We been friends forever. You just met trade last night, but now you gonna cancel all plans cuz he's coming over?

In this example, the opportunity to engage in sex with trade is literally privileged above the companionship of friends. In contrast, Courtney and Victor immediately respond in unison: "I don't think so." Courtney continues to explain why he said masculinity is not necessarily privileged: "Because I've heard people say 'All trade do is mess up your credits and leave you with two kids.'" In this example, Courtney signifies off static gender norms when he embodies a femme or woman ethos to evoke "the ain't shit nigga" trope to describe trade as your typical triflin' man. In this way, trade is/are read as masculine and are categorized with straight men and placed in hierarchy lower than gay men. While their sex appeal tied to masculinity makes these men desired in the club or bedroom, Courtney's comments suggest trade are problematic outside of that. I will be honest—their answer originally flabbergasted me. As a Black gay man, who is often read as femme, I have a lifetime of experience that suggests how masculinity has privilege in the larger world and in the Black gay community. However, Victor and Courtney helped me to not see masculinity and privilege as flat or static.

In Black queer communities and mainstream discourses, it is commonly assumed that men and/or the masculine partner (as if there is always only one) is often the top, the giver or the dom(inant), while the woman or femme partner (as if there is always only one) is often the bottom, the receiver or the sub(missive). People who are sexually versatile or switch are often erased from discourse and literacies about sexuality. Sexual dynamics are not static in white heteronormative or Black queer contexts. One of the most common-sense truths or literacies that circulate about trade is that they are



good looking tops and are good in bed. While not all trade are good looking tops or good in bed, common discussion and the participants' fantasies of trade often came back to these ideas. Courtney and Victor both state that trade do not have to be attractive. Courtney goes on to say, "When you think of trade, you think of someone who has a good stroke game." Courtney's comments demonstrate that literacies about trade are steeped in pornographic fantasy.

Specifically, the idea that trade is ideally a top is as recurrent as the idea that he should be masculine. I asked Courtney and Victor if trade could be a bottom. They both hesitate and Courtney says, "Yes." Then Victor responds, "I feel like after you find out the person's a bottom, they're no longer trade." They both laugh. Similar to Courtney's comments about trade being good in bed,

***“Joseph and Ashley engage in on-the-spot graphic sexual imagery to transport the listener to the actual scenario. They essentially tell mini-narrative/scenarios to denaturalize commonsense static understanding trade as tops.”***

Victor makes it clear that he sees trade as tops ideally. Again, the fantasy of trade as straight masculine tops with good dick is clear. Both of their comments reflect common beliefs about masculine gender performance tied to topping as a sexual behavior and identity.

Joseph and Ashley acknowledge these beliefs but engage in a rewriting of literacy by speaking back to these ideas. The old adage that you cannot judge a book by its cover informs their sexual literacies. Joseph states that what you see in the street is not necessarily what is going on behind closed doors. He states that, when it comes to how sexual partners determine who is topping versus bottoming, it is more of a "one-to-one negotiation." Specifically, he discusses that someone is not automatically a bottom because they are effeminate or engage in traditionally feminine grooming practices.

Once upon a time, you immediately assume that those people aren't trade. (Yet) they'll turn around and they'll pull out a package and be like BONG! [gestures] . . . and they'll expect you to get down on that, and a lot of guys do. I've seen a lot of guys who are very pretty and will tell you in a minute that they will climb on your back and have no problem addressing that and there are guys who like that as well.

Ashley echoes Joseph's sentiments, saying that she knows really masculine men that are bottoms and very feminine men who "will tear your butt up when the lights go out." Joseph and Ashley engage in on-the-spot graphic sexual imagery to transport the listener to the actual scenario. They essentially tell mini-narrative/scenarios to denaturalize commonsense static understanding of trade as tops.

Lastly, many of my participants work to destabilize the notion of masculinity as desirable. Joseph uses his attraction to his effeminate partner to suggest that not all Black queer people want masculine men:

I love him for that. Everything about him—and what I love is that he is a lot softer and he's a lot meeker. But make no mistake like any other man he's always there for me and he had my back when I needed him.

Joseph essentializes meekness and softness as feminine and loyalty and support as masculine attributes he appreciates in his partner. While he uses traditional readings of gender to describe the attributes themselves, he also deliberately uses contradictory notions of gender to boast about how special his partner is.

I asked Courtney and Victor if they were primarily attracted to trade, and both were resistant to saying yes. Specifically, Courtney discusses liking men who are both masculine and feminine: “I’m attracted to butch queens preferably. Someone who walks on the fence. They not too masculine. They not too femme. They can adapt to any situation.” Courtney confesses a desire for a partner who can both be comfortable at a gay club on a Saturday night and church on Sunday morning. I then kid, “Versatile, if you will,” alluding to the sexual position. Courtney and Victor laugh. Essentially, Courtney wants the best of both worlds, someone who can “play the game” of homophobia. Victor

***“The focus of this piece is to get the reader to rethink what they think they know about straight men in particular and sexuality more generally. The knowledges of out Black queer people are centered in this article as experts on sexuality.”***

goes on to say that he is not really attracted to gender or sexual archetypes: “I think it depends on the person. I wouldn’t say I like a certain type of person. It depends.” Victor’s comments, while somewhat vague, speak to the core ideas behind trade/pullin’ trade as a literacy. Victor and my other participants acknowledge

the role that normative sexual literacies of gender performance and sexual orientation play in constructing the social world around them. They also look beyond, speak back to, and rewrite their own sexual literacies for themselves.

## Conclusion: Telling Our Truths

Truth can be isolating. When one knows a truth that runs counter to the common narrative, it makes them an outsider. This article plays a role in bringing these disparate truths together. The participants rewrite sexual literacies in order to narrate their experiences and to speak to commonsense truths in the Black queer community. These truths work to disrupt heteronormative sexual literacies that circulate in the Black queer community and mainstream culture. There has been much discussion about Black men who exist in the gray area. However, much of that highlights Black men’s deception or struggle with self-acceptance. This is not an attempt to out or sensationalize the lives of trade, or reinforce mainstream ideas of gender, which is why they and their perspectives aren’t the focus of this article. The focus of this piece is to get readers to rethink what they think they know about straight men in particular and sexuality more generally. As such, I intentionally shift the gaze from a straight perspective on sexuality and men to a queer one; the knowledges of out Black queer people are centered in this article as experts on sexuality.

Ashley often referenced escalating HIV and STD rates tied to promiscuity as a reason to tell her truths. Joseph described his and his partner’s roles as gay-parents as part of the reason he is in

a position to impart knowledge about how it *really* is. All of the participants seemed committed to speaking back to commonly believed untruths about sexuality specific to Black queer people. The participants demonstrate that being able to read another person's truth or interest, which may run counter to the heterosexual or the masculine personas they present, is a type of specialized knowledge—a literacy. Fierce literacies are about sharing truths and experiences in an effort to correct misconceptions about sexuality. This awareness does not come from just reading queer theory or watching a film, but from practicing and listening to stories about pullin' trade and throwing shade.

Literacies about trade reveal the ways that normative understandings of sexuality often erase a discussion of sexual practices that do not fit neatly into orientations such as gay, straight, and/or pan or bisexual. This examination of pullin' trade as a larger fierce literacy reveals how normative understandings of sexual orientation play a role in maintaining heteronormativity and queer erasure. Trade is deliberately singular (even though it is talking about both a singular person and a collective) because it pejoratively speaks to "how they (collectively) be." It is a riff off of the idea that all heterosexual men act and think alike. Trade as a literacy reflects the reality that scares "straight" people the most, which is that queer people can tell who else is queer.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by my university's Institutional Review Board. Participants chose to use their first names in the study.

<sup>2</sup> I intended to feature videos in this article as I had done with my article about shade, but two issues prevented me from doing so. First, I encountered technological difficulties and had to resort to audio recording in some cases. However, there was another complexity as well. Participants were not as interested in talking about trade on video in a public place as they were when I asked about shade. In retrospect, I understand why people would be skittish about discussing sex and sexuality at a Pride festival, I guess. Nevertheless, I was still able to capture valuable data that I present here without multimedia.

<sup>3</sup> Personally, I also see connections between contemporary usage of the term trade and the United States' history of trading enslaved Black men for money as a part of the larger North Atlantic Slave system.

<sup>4</sup> C. J. Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* discusses how homophobic "fag discourses" are circulated among teenage males.

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## Book Review *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* by Karma R. Chávez

Ruben “Ruby” Mendoza Michigan State University

**K**arma R. Chávez’s *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* is a critical contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition. Chávez’s book demonstrates queer coalitional work as it examines heteronormative cistems of oppression that have disempowered and marginalized migrant bodies and folks of color since the early AIDS epidemic.<sup>1</sup> However, before engaging with Chávez’s work, it is important to note that Ryan Mitchell, Assistant Professor of English at Lafayette College, has also written a review about this book. In his review, Mitchell provides a strong account about the parallels to current events, as well as articulating Chávez’s ability to add to archival histories by “shifting focus from the work accomplished by mostly white, mostly middle class, cosmopolitan AIDS activist groups . . . [and] draw[ing] from queer of color, migrant, and feminist traditions to recover an alternative history of AIDS, one that is attuned to how the epidemic affected (and continues to affect) those on the borders of civic and national belonging.” As Mitchell illuminates, Chávez’s work adds to archival work by amplifying a historical perspective that captures racialized migrant bodies and moves away from centering White bodies, organizations, and perspectives. Building from Mitchell, I also see this book queering heteronormative institutionalized cistems of oppression to signify white supremacy’s dominance and its violence against marginalized, disempowered, and ignored bodies.<sup>2</sup> As my review suggests, this text argumentatively informs readers about perspectives, identities, and literacies that are not often discussed in dominant heteronormative educational and archival scholarship.

In “Introduction: The Alienizing Nation,” Chávez as a rhetorical critic tells a story about how institutionalized powers (such as public health officials, politicians, media, and others) have disproportionately impacted Black men and Haitian migrants (and of course queer and trans bodies) through alienizing logic. She amplifies this point by articulating the HIV-positive migrant ban that lasted for 22 years and ended in 2010. Moreover, Chávez theorizes how alienizing logic represents a pivotal framework that “refers to a structure of thinking that insists that some are necessarily members of a community and some are recognized as not belonging, even if they physically reside there” (5). Then, she connects and builds from scholars to connect the alien with the citizen, amplifying the logic as institutionalized power that manifests differently, including “genocide, lynching, the plantation, the reservation, the ghetto, the internment camp, the prison, the hospital, quarantine, ban, or deportation” (9). This is magnified through the alien logic and disease section, which articulates intersectional identities that have been severely affected. As Chávez writes, racialized transnational communities were impacted, which represents this monograph’s exigency to understand how “AIDS created an opportunity for politicians, public health officials, and mainstream media to use immigration status, race, and citizenship to enact alienizing logic” (12).

In its entirety, Chavez’s book contains five chapters, each divided into two parts to exemplify



institutional disempowerment by dominant heteronormative culture against minoritized bodies. In part one, “Alienizing Logic and Structure,” Chávez emphasizes “how people with power to frame issues and make decisions utilize disease as an opportunity to enact alienizing logic” (14). In part two, “Resisting Alienizing Logic,” she “shift[s] attention to how mostly queer AIDS activists responded to and resisted alienizing logic as it applied to migrant communities who may or may not have also been queer” (14). Although this examination of institutional disempowerment examines historical accounts, Chávez notes there is a deep connection between the present, especially in consideration of COVID-19. As she clearly proclaims, AIDS has a lot to teach us all about the past and present.

In chapter 1, “A Brief Rhetorical History of Quarantine,” Chávez provides “a rhetorical history of quarantine in the United States, beginning in the late eighteenth century” (20). The purpose of this chapter is to trace how assertions and beliefs of quarantine rhetorically traveled from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Chávez “unpack[s] how quarantine, as an alienizing logic, emerges primarily from concerns about mobility and migration, showing that the applications of quarantine frequently rely on rhetorical appeals premised in anxieties about foreign invasion, international migration, and migrant communities that may bring infectious disease into the larger community” (20). Through this brief rhetorical history, Chávez establishes that conversations in relation to migrant and immigration discourses are deeply connected with quarantine, amplifying why “quarantine is a manifestation of US alienizing logic” (38). This sentiment signifies how quarantine is traced and emerged in direct connection with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

In chapter 2, “AIDS and the Rhetoric of Quarantine,” Chávez illustrates how alienizing logics manifested in rhetoric of quarantine by closely “exploring how calls for and fears of quarantining people with AIDS proliferated in US public discourse during the early years of the pandemic” (42). She situates the rhetoric of quarantine and examines its presence during the early years in media, political, legal, religious, and gay rights discourses. The chapter also details that although quarantine was not enacted during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, “a few high-profile and sensationalized cases of Black sex workers animated the creation or renewal of quarantine laws and set the stage for laws that criminalize HIV. . . . [and] quarantine ultimately became national common sense in US immigration policy on HIV/AIDS” (43). As Chávez concludes in this chapter, discourses on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS garnered mainstream appeal. As she writes, “As alien citizens, all US American homosexuals, including those with race and class privilege, ended up suffering because of problematic ideas from the right wing becoming dominant” (65). But as Chávez asserts clearly, Black folks endured the worst of it and migrants also encountered dire consequences, illuminating how institutional powers devalue the most disempowered bodies in the US. This chapter signifies the harmful rhetorical discourses that amplified violence against marginalized identities and the real consequences of those actions.

In chapter 3, “National Common Sense and the Ban on HIV-Positive Migrants,” Chávez examines congressional debates about the senators’ reliance that connect with what she calls a rhetoric of “national common sense.” As she writes, “this chapter details how the law that defined HIV infection as a ‘dangerous contagious disease’ and therefore grounds for immigration exclusion came to be” (67). This ban, as Chávez explains, holds rhetorical significance, as this ban had persistent

institutionalized ramifications from the “alienating logic that manifests in interlocking rhetorics of public health, contagion, and immigration” (67). More, Chávez adds to public memory on HIV/AIDS, addressing a prolific site of rhetoric that has gone unmentioned in the scholarly record. For this chapter, it provides a critical example of how “alienizing logic became embedded in national common sense in ways that led to scapegoating and exclusion of migrants” (100). This amplifies how interpersonal relations, such as senators, can perpetuate institutional violence through law and policy.

In chapter 4, “Boycotts and Protests of the International AIDS Conferences,” Chávez considers the rhetorical significance of the boycotts and protests that were enacted at the International AIDS Conference 1989-1992, which were scheduled in the US from 1990 to 1992. As Chávez argues, the “boycotts and protests of these conferences are important sites of rhetorical investigation because they represent a key instance of transnational coalition building that resisted the codification of alienating logic in US immigration law” (104). She builds an argument about how these acts of protests and boycotts also represented rhetorical movement strategies. Through this examination, this exemplifies how “boycotts work so forcefully to create rhetorical space that would not otherwise exist” (129) and represents an act of transnational coalitional building.

In chapter 5, “AIDS Activist Media and the ‘Haitian Connection,’” Chávez illustrates that AIDS activist media extended beyond organizations such as ACT UP. As she writes, “*New York Native* . . . provided some of the most comprehensive reporting on AIDS issues available during the early years of the pandemic, arguably defining the genre of AIDS activist print media” (133). Although she acknowledges that reporters were White dominant, which reflects a larger structural problem, the organization did conduct extensive coverage “by rely[ing] heavily on Haitian voices and provid[ing] long-form reporting on the issues” (134). This exemplifies, as Chávez states, “relying on the materials these activists produced allows us to tell a story about how alienizing logic impacted Haitians and how people resisted when few other primary source materials exist that can do so” (134). Although the chapter examines *New York Native*’s ability to challenge dominant views—and James Wentzy’s AIDS community TV, which recorded, documented, and presented material that highlight migrant voices that were detained which contributed to the release of detainees—it includes an important component about coalition building. Meaning, conceptualizing AIDS media criticality by challenging and responding “how ban and quarantine severely impacted Haitians is an important part of the public memory of HIV/AIDS. The revitalization of this memory is crucial for learning to build coalitions that address such complexities in the present and future” (156). Chávez signals the need to understand the vitality of learning about public memory about disempowered and ignored bodies that continue to be unnoticed and uncovered.

In all, Chávez’s book manifests an exigency that cohesively conducts archival queer coalitional work to challenge heteronormative systems that neglect to amplify intersectional migrant bodies. As Chávez articulates in the opening of her book, these enactments of alienizing logics can be seen historically and presently, which signifies the need to stay attuned to these types of logics on bodies that are disempowered by institutional structures. This also includes citizenship. Although these alienizing logics severely impact marginalized bodies, Chávez presents queer coalitional building

and demonstrates it as a tactical approach for advocating the survival from the cistem that fails queer and trans BIPOC lives. Meaning, queering the fuck out of heteronormativity and its oppressive logics remains vital to support the most marginalized individuals.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I incorporate cistems instead of systems as a rhetorical move. In “Violent Cistems: Trans Experiences of Bathroom Space,” Nigel Patel writes: “By cistem I refer to the systematized power which oppresses, subjugates, and marginalises transgender people” (51). In their defining notion of cistem, I utilize this term to articulate cistems of oppression against queer, trans, non-binary, and BIPOC lives and their direct connection to Eurocentrism.

<sup>2</sup> I use *queering* in an intentional and critical way. Queering, as K. J. Rawson articulates, can be used as an “analytic critique of normativity, particularly heteronormativity” (248). I see queering as challenging, disrupting, and countering normative cistems of oppression.

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