LiCS

Literacy in Composition Studies

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.

Editors' Introduction To Issue 10.2

This issue centers the stories of people who (re)define what meaningful literacy practices are from such positions as an aging mother, women refugees, a returning student, and formerly incarcerated people. These articles explore how literacy practices shift and change over the life course and across contexts in ways that ask us to reorient our own understanding of the relationship between literate subjects and the knowledge they produce.

In this issue's lead article, "Bouncing Back: Resilience and Its Limits in Late-Age Composing," Louise Wetherbee Phelps undertakes the study and analysis of an unpublished body of lifespan writing by her late mother, Virginia Wetherbee, as part of her own contribution to retrospective lifespan studies and "literacy lives in relation" (2). Phelps begins by asking how to undertake the daunting task of a project that has challenged her in multiple ways: "challenges of method…of genre… of grief, responsibility, and learning under the condition and unpredictable trajectory of [her] own aging" (ibid). One of the sayings Phelps inherited from Wetherbee, "proceed as way opens," provides a framework for a series of articles in which Phelps considers the intersections of longitudinal and lifespan studies, late-age literacies, cross-generational literacies, slow composing, and ecosystemic and chronotopic approaches to literacy. In this article, Phelps charts the relationship between her own composing project on parenting and her aging literacy in figures that visualize a pattern of moments of disruption and resilience that Phelps terms "bouncing back." Ultimately, Phelps reminds us that our understanding of the intersections of literacy and aging are, to quote an embroidered saying that Wetherbee passed on to her and that hangs by her desk, "It's not as simple as you think."

Katie Silvester examines how women refugees living in "protracted displacement" (39), or "decades-long displacement and massive refugee resettlement process" (ibid), use dialogue, narrative, and re-story to offer perspectives on literacy learning across their lifespans. In "At the 'Ends of Kinship': Women Re(kin)figuring Literacy Practices in Protracted Displacement," Silvester draws from an ethnographic study of women's literacy learning experiences in the Bhutanese refugees resettlement process and considers the relationality they take up as they negotiate various people, places, and contexts. Specifically, she elaborates on "the ends of kinship" (40), which she defines as "a dialogic space of negotiating relational ties that have become stretched and transformed by local-global forces" (ibid). This dialogic space allows women to "*kin*-script and (*kin*)figure their own ideas about and practices of literacy in relation to kin and friends as these relational ties stretch, contract, and become transformed throughout a protracted displacement and ongoing resettlement process" (42). In the process of kinship, friendship, and woman-centered community, these women were able to redefine their literate subjectivities, relationships, and practices through grounded, embodied, and imaginal means. Silverster argues for a dynamic methodological and theoretical approach to better understand adult literacy learning in migration through "the tensions and contradictions of everyday living in relation to others over time" (46).

Maggie Shelledy's "Precarious Citizenship: Ambivalence, Literacy, and Prisoner Reentry" uses case studies to explore "the literacy myths that surround higher education in prison" by foregrounding formerly incarcerated people's experiences with and the effects of their participation

in higher education in prison (HEP) programs (61). Of particular interest to Shelledy are embedded assumptions about academic literacy as a doorway to citizenship and the ways three formerly incarcerated students disrupt those assumptions. These students offer a range of perspectives about their HEP experiences within the contexts of reentry, or the transition out of incarceration. Topics include the damage that hopeful rhetoric about HEP can produce when these students go through reentry, the loss of meaningful community that can be build in incarcerated settings, the challenges of transitioning from HEP to college campuses, and the felt sense of the limits of being able to reintegrate into "mainstream society." Shelledy invites scholars to reconsider how we think about the meaning and significance of literacy in light of these student perspectives while resisting simple solutions. She asks us to "listen and hold space for the material and social realities of our students' likely futures, which may look very different from our own, as well as their dogged, insistent hope, and create learning environments aimed at cultivating belonging rather than assimilation" (73).

The final essay of this issue, Alison Turner's "Citing Oral Histories in Literacy Studies," shares the educational journey of Jazz, a Black, returning student in Minnesota who shared her oral history with the St. Catherine University (SCU) Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project. Jazz's literacy journey is a complex and compelling one, and that complexity is best captured through Jazz's own words in the oral history she provided. Given this complexity, Turner argues persuasively that despite many oral history projects/archives, literacy studies has failed to center oral histories as primary sources within written research. Turner provides snapshots of the low frequency of oral history citations in literacy research, explores the reasons and results of such over-reliance on written sources, and ultimately contends that if we fail to cite existing oral sources in our research we limit both our methodological integrity and the range of rich insights into literacy that oral narratives offer. Ultimately, Turner provides not only a methodological reality check for the field of literacy studies, but a significant and deeply "heard" case study of literacy development. We are certain that readers will find this piece – and her argument that "more intentional use of oral histories as primary resources could enrich ongoing efforts of inclusion among literacy journals" – powerful (79).

We conclude this issue with Joshua Barnes' review of Erec Smith's book *A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition: A Semblance of Empowerment*. Barnes focuses on Smith's argument that "anti-racist pedagogy in rhetoric and composition often inadvertently disempowers students by ignoring important aspects of empowerment theory" (100). Barnes, a former student of Smith himself and a practicing teacher of rhetoric and composition, notes a challenge he perceives Smith to be offering the field: to sit with the discomfort of recognizing that some theories and pedagogies may, despite themselves, have disempowering effects for our students.

We hope readers find these contributions as provocative as we did, and we encourage readers to submit essays to our symposium section that take up or respond to any of the conversational threads raised here.

Kara Poe Alexander, Brenda Glascott, Al Harahap, Tara Lockhart, Juli Parrish and Chris Warnick

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BOOK REVIEWS

Bouncing Back: Resilience and Its Limits
in Late-Age Composing

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KEYWORDS

aging literacy; late-age composing; resilience; lifespan writing;
ecological lens; visualization

When my mother, Virginia Wetherbee, died in 2015 at the age of almost 98, she left behind a body of lifespan writing, most of it unpublished. After her death I saved as many of her writings and composing materials as I could find. These records bore witness to a remarkable life of literacy that remained largely invisible to others, but was entangled with my own in countless ways from my earliest years to her death. My ideas about what I would do with this legacy were inchoate, but my first step—the "duty nearest me"—was to preserve it. . . tangible evidence of who she was as I had known her best, through our shared love of reading and writing.

My initial, vague thought was to memorialize her impact on my own writing in a brief, elegiac essay. But a year after her death, I took a huge leap and committed myself to a much bigger project: a retrospective lifespan study of the linked literacies and lives of my mother and me over 75 years, which I envisioned as a dialogic literacy memoir. My vision of the memoir is comprehensively dialogic: each chapter will develop different moments and aspects of our mother-daughter relationship, exploring the many literal and metaphoric patterns—"strange loops"—that bond us through literacy.

My decision coincided with the first calls for studying writing across the lifespan and the formation of the Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration (see https://www.lifespanwriting.org/the-facts), followed by a series of publications on this goal (Bazerman et al., "Taking"; Prior, "Setting"; Bazerman, et al., *Lifespan Development*; Dippre and Phillips, *Approaches*[i]). In this emerging work, "lifespan" (often coupled with "lifewide") is a perspective that locates writing ("acts of inscribed meaning-making") and writers' development in time and history (see Dippre and Phillips's working definition of lifespan writing research, "Generating" 6). This work frequently converges with multidisciplinary research and theories that conceive human beings as dynamic, active systems co-developing over time in relation to equally dynamic systems (biological, material, social, cultural) at

many scales and levels from genes to the cosmos. As I will unfold here, this ecosystemic, chronotopic understanding of persons as a fusion of individual and context (person<>context) constitutes a world view with profound implications for how I conduct my own lifespan research.

Although this perspective can inform any research method and enrich studies of any age or period of literacy lives, longitudinal studies are valuable to expand the time span of scholarship in literacy development. Until recently these have been rare, limited in duration, and largely focused on college students. Given the methodological obstacles to undertaking prospective studies of individuals' literacy development over the entire lifespan (Bazerman, "Lifespan Longitudinal"), scholars like Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk have begun studying lifespan literacy lives retrospectively, in her case by interviewing four women in their eighties and nineties. It is likely that writing researchers will use their own lives as material for such studies, as retiring generations write autobiographical or autoethnographic accounts and memoirs.

My project joins in this emerging tradition of retrospective lifespan studies but—as a dialogic study of two writers developing interdependently over long lives—it is unique in several respects. Focusing on literacy lives in relation, reflecting the life-course principle of "linked lives," is a recent trend (Brandt, "Writing" and *Literacy*; Rosenberg; Dippre). My project is a cross-generational study of a mother-daughter pair, of which one—myself—is both researcher and participant. But, as a lifespan study of a dialogic pair, mine will be unprecedented in the time span it covers: my mother, Virginia, lived (and wrote) for almost a century; the overlap in our literacy lives is seventy-five years. Whereas I am an academic writer and scholar of writing, literacy, composition, and rhetoric, still writing at eighty-two, Virginia (who shared these intellectual interests) composed for nonacademic audiences in genres like memoir and personal essay, drawing on wide reading of both scholarly and literary genres. After decades of shifting roles and relations in our close literacy partnership and dialogue, she counted on me to support her aging literacy in her final years and to steward her writings after her death.

Taken together, these facts presented a formidable challenge to my project on multiple levels: as a researcher, challenges of method, including data collection and positionality; as a writer, challenges of genre; as a person, challenges of grief, responsibility, and learning under the condition and unpredictable trajectory of my own aging. With little idea how even to start such a daunting task, I remembered the Quaker saying my mother quoted whenever I was stuck and didn't know how to make a choice or move forward: "Proceed as way opens."

> *"With little idea how to even start such a daunting task, I remembered the Quaker saying my mother quoted whenever I was stuck and didn't know how to make a choice or move forward: 'Proceed as way opens.'"*

This article is the first—unexpected—fruit of following that advice. In it, I will trace the trajectory of my mother's aging literacy—conceived through an ecodevelopmental lens as "the dynamic of her literacy system in late age"—and her slow composing as she worked on her final project, an unfinished essay on parenting.

I.

The first core tasks I set for myself were to archive the writings of my mother and myself and to develop chronotypes (charts of time and place) for each so that I could ultimately align them to investigate and document the multiple levels in which our literacies were in dialogue (both intertextually and in our ongoing discussions of rhetoric, literate processes, learning, and texts). I have completed these tasks for Virginia's writings; my own (a much larger oeuvre) are largely archived but not yet mapped chronotopically.

Among the materials I brought home with me after my mother's death were drafts and notes documenting the long trajectory of her last project, a study of parenting that spanned cultural changes from her childhood in the 1920s to the present. She began researching this essay at age seventy and worked on it for more than twenty-five years. In 2010, when she was ninety-three, I typed up what turned out to be her last draft of *Parenting*—about seventy-five pages. Despite increasing frailty, my mother persevered in composing it for several more years, but in late age time outran her ability to complete her plans.

Having archived and read through my mother's lifespan writings, close study of this unfinished essay was a natural starting point for my project. Uniquely among her writings, its incompleteness and extended composing trajectory meant that many of the raw materials of her composing were still available for me to collect and study. During her last few years, after following its progress through years of ongoing dialogue over our writings, I had become actively engaged in enabling her work on the essay. I was deeply invested in her task, saddened by its incompletion. As I reread and thought about this work as a testament to her continuing development as a writer in late age, I had many unanswered questions: what it meant to her, why she worked on it so long, how she planned to revise and end it, what kept her from finishing it.

My project made its first unexpected turn when my research on Virginia's late-life composing took on a life of its own, generating questions and insights that transformed the project into an open-ended journey of discovery with many levels, paths, and possible outcomes besides the memoir. In this essay I begin to follow out those directions and adumbrate their richness.

My questions about Virginia's unfinished essay opened my way to a deep exploration of aging and its relations to literacy and composing. Studying writing over the lifespan introduces "age" as a hitherto disregarded identity category and directs attention to "aging" as a necessary dimension of analysis for any literacy study (Bowen, "Composing"). Although not confined to older people, the intersection of age studies with literacy, writing, and rhetoric studies has generated a growing body of work on literacies and writings of old age, including "how literate activity shapes, and is shaped by, ideologies of aging" (vii). (See, for example, Bowen, "Beyond Repair" and "Age Identity"; Rumsey; Crow; Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia*; and the special issue *Composing a Further Life*). As I pursued my own inquiries and began to participate in this research community (Phelps, "Horizons"), I saw the potential for my study of Virginia's aging literacy to contribute to this work.

To guide this study, I formulated two sets of research questions, which will be addressed in

separate essays:

1. What was Viginia's purpose in writing this essay? How did she define her composing task? What was the meaning of the essay to her, as the final piece in her writing over the lifespan?

2. Why was she unable to finish this essay despite working on it well into her nineties? What were the obstacles and constraints that affected her composing? How are these related to aging, especially in the later stages of adulthood?

These questions may seem merely personal and idiosyncratic to one woman, but they are rich in possibilities for revealing experiences shared among others as well as emphasizing the ineluctable individuality of each person's lifespan writing experiences. The first set of questions has some precedent in a long multidisciplinary tradition of studying life review and reminiscence, especially at the end of life, in relation to wisdom. The second is largely unexplored, although even critical scholars who emphasize the ideological construction of old age have begun to acknowledge the role of embodiment and attend to how late-life frailties and losses affect the ecology of body, mind, and environment (Morell; Teems; Rumsey). In fact, my findings on the limits that affect resilience in aging literacy speak to these questions posed by Lauren Marshall Bowen as points of departure for future research:

"Counterintuitively, I turned first to the question of incompletion, perhaps because I was haunted by recent, vivid memories of my mother's fading literacy at the end of her life; perhaps because of the parallels that made me wonder and worry about my own aging trajectory as I embarked on my own ambitious, long-term project in late life."

How might bodily aging motivate, as well as render difficult (perhaps even impossible), particular engagements with literacy?

What might we learn about the literate identities of late-life writers who. . . have reduced autonomy over their own space? Or those who know longer have physical access to autotopographies when forced by financial and/or health [sic] to leave familiar home places? ("Age Identity")

Counterintuitively, I turned first to the question of incompletion, perhaps because I was haunted by recent, vivid memories of my mother's fading literacy at the end of her life; perhaps because of the parallels that made me wonder and worry about my own aging trajectory as I embarked on my own ambitious, long-term project in late life. It is that question which I take up in this essay, after a brief overview of the relationships between my questions and their possible answers.

II.

The two sets of research questions I posed about my mother's unfinished essay together represent positive and negative poles of aging as it affects literacy:

In terms of benefits, individuals' development continues to the very end of life, enabling them—like my mother in this project—to seek the integrative, affective, and spiritual understandings and commitments we call wisdom (Cohen; Edmondson; Hoare; Kail and Cavanaugh; Karelitz, Jarvin, and Sternberg).

In terms of challenges, over time the fact and circumstances of aging ultimately erode the integrity of the system of body/mind/environment as it constitutes and supports literacy (Agronin; Bjorklund; Gawande; Gutchess; Harada, Love, and Triebel).

Although it is the interplay between these two poles that defines the trajectory of my mother's literacy, this essay centers on how aging impacts Virginia's literacy system to slow, disrupt, or impede her composing activities, rather than on the forces that fuel her resilience. I'll locate my answers in the relationship between the composing task she set herself and her aging literacy, understood ecologically, in terms of interconnected changes in her brain, body, and environment. In tracing the timelines of her aging literacy and her composing I identified a pattern in which the forces of disruption and disintegration are repeatedly beaten back, but eventually overcome her resilience in very late old age. I call this resilience "bouncing back," a term invented by American prisoners of war in North Vietnam to inspire one another's recovery from being "broken" by torture and privation.

What *was* Virginia's composing task?

Her unfinished essay is on parenting—"the process that begins the shaping of a human being"—as it evolved in the US through periods of cultural change during her lifetime. The task she set for herself was to follow these changes from her own childhood to the present day, drawing on personal experience, cultural knowledge, and eclectic reading of academic and literary genres to explain how and why theories of human development and American practices of parenting had changed, and to arrive at an answer to what I would call her research questions: "How can parents give a child a sense of wonder? …A sense of place? …A set of values and principles? A sense of meaning in life conducive to future happiness? . . . How good is the "good enough mother"? the good enough father? What do good enough parents do?" (Virginia Wetherbee, *Parenting*). As I'll describe in the companion piece to this essay, this effort to integrate knowledge from life experience, cultural observations, reading, and other semiotic sources represents a developmental literacy task characteristic of late age.

Virginia's composing task grew larger and more complex as the "present" advanced, adding more years of sociocultural change to account for, while her lived experience and prodigious reading kept expanding and reconfiguring the knowledge she was integrating in the essay. Meanwhile technologies of literacy were evolving at an accelerating pace, adding new affordances for her research and writing, but also becoming more challenging to learn and use as she aged from seventy to almost ninety-eight. During those years Virginia transitioned from vigorous old age to "frail old age," moving from independence to interdependence to dependence to crisis to end of life (Aronson). Her literacy aged along this timeline (both positively and negatively) as a function of interrelated changes in her body, mind, and environment. The positive side of her aging literacy is manifest in the composing project itself, and her sustained pursuit of it, but my focus here is on the forces of decline, the changes that ultimately set the limits to her resilience.

Although the complex relations that constitute the ecology of Virginia's embodied literacy strike

a balance between losses and gains as she matures, ultimately this balance breaks down in very late age, and, while she still composes—working at the task—the losses (the erosion of body, brain, and environment) are too great to finish it (Baltes).

Figure 1 visualizes the relationship between Virginia's composing task and her aging literacy over time as a relationship between a rising line—expressing the increasing scope and difficulty of the task she set for herself—and a falling line, which is a composite, abstract representation of her aging literacy.
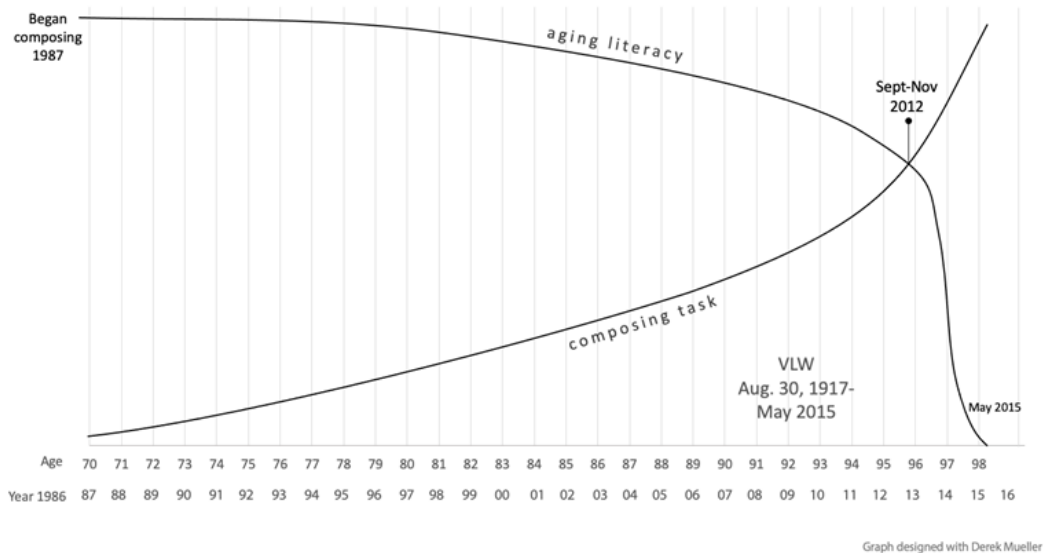
Figure 1. Intersection of VLW's composing task and her aging literacy.

I propose that when these two lines cross, their intersection represents the moment when it became impossible to finish the essay: when Virginia could no longer bounce back to a literacy level sufficient to carry out her plan: to revise her drafts and compose new text for an ending. I set that date between September and November 2012, after her ninety-sixth birthday.

I explicate this figure and address my questions of incompletion and challenges to Virginia's late-age literacy through a series of graphs that visualize my findings and claims. However, first I must take a step back to consider the methods that validate these findings and the conceptual framework that shaped them and makes them intelligible within the landscape of current research on aging, literacy, and lifespan writing development. Readers who are impatient to read the findings on Virginia's aging literacy and composing trajectory as reported in the graphs—the heart of my essay—may want to jump forward to section VII (pp. xx), but ultimately those findings and their implications are only understandable in terms of an intellectual, affective, and methodological discovery process within the framework of the larger project.

III.

At a meta-level, my research process for this project as a whole is governed by an overarching principle of emergence captured in my mother's counsel to "proceed as way opens." One consequence of adopting this principle is that the role of methods and theories in the project, and their complex interrelations, will not fit into any conventional description of methodology. The project requires an eclectic, hybrid approach to methods, research traditions, and theoretical lenses, adopting and adapting them to fit the purposes and objects of study in different parts or aspects of the whole. These decisions can't be anticipated, since they will emerge as I follow trails that turn, branch, and intertwine unpredictably.

As a process, proceeding as way opens requires me to keep my mind and heart open to new learning that constantly upends my understandings, both prospectively and retrospectively. In a long project—"slow scholarship," "slow composing"—with many dimensions and threads, any apparent closure, like capturing some part of it in writing, is provisional and subject to revision. Accepting that feature as intrinsic to my research process, I've chosen to frame this essay as a journey of discovery and to make transparent certain moments when new information or insights serendipitously disrupted its trajectory.

My positionality in this project adds another, deeper dimension to my journey, one that manifested most fully while composing and recomposing this essay, at the nexus of method and genre. I found words for my experience (and many resonances) in the work of Jessica Restaino and Ruth E. Ray, two feminist scholars of literacy and rhetoric who have written dialogically about intimate others in parallel circumstances of illness and death, loss, love, and grief. In *Surrender*, Restaino researched and wrote about (and with) a beloved friend, during and after her friend's illness and death from breast cancer. In her memoir *Endnotes*, Ray wrote about her loving relationship with a much older man with Parkinson's disease, whom she met in a nursing home while doing research on aging. I write as a daughter about her mother's late-age composing after a life-long literacy partnership, acting now as loving caretaker of her writing in the wake of her death. Their writings align my work with that of feminist scholars (in rhetoric, literacy, gerontology) on illness, death, and old age. In each case, we are learning by trial and error how to engage in what Ray calls "passionate scholarship," which is "heartfelt and emotional but also intellectually rigorous and well-documented" (*Endnotes* 1). Ray and Restaino together eloquently capture the demands this kind of scholarship makes on us intellectually and emotionally, "collaps[ing]" walls between the personal, the academic, and the analytic" (Restaino 9). Our intimate relations to our subjects as witnesses and participants in their experiences—their/our stories—requires us to let go of ("unlearn") the certainties of method and genre in what Restaino comprehensively calls "surrender as method."

Restaino borrows the language of performance artist Nao Bustamente to express the same principle I called "proceed as way open": "'The work that I do is about not knowing the equipment, and not knowing that particular balance, and then finding it as I go'" (Bustamente in Halberstom (interview) 143, qtd. by Restaino 65). Restaino interprets Bustamente's words "as a method both for grief *and* for research and writing along the fault lines of illness, intimacy, and loss. Ultimately if we

embrace Bustamante's 'finding it as we go,' we become new agents and new researchers, over and over again for as long as we move through the work" (68).

As both scholars note, one of the great challenges of engaging in passionate scholarship is finding ways to write it: learning to blend, blur, or invent genres to capture not only its methodological features (flexibility, unpredictability, playfulness, hybridity) but its affective and ethical dimensions. That includes accounting for the experience of the scholar not only as observer-recorder-participant with an emotional investment in another's life but also as a writer immersed in the processes of researching and composing as discovery and self-transformation. Writing this essay involved experimenting with ways to strike the right balance between personal and professional, different from what it will be in a memoir; making visible how discoveries are emergent in the intertwining of research and writing processes. The resulting blurred or hybrid genre, as I've noted, is most fundamentally a journey narrative. It constitutes a layered story of learning at several levels, each with its own surprises, obstacles and constraints, tradeoffs, and disruptions. One is a methodological journey of many facets that can't be separated from genre. (As Restaino found, surrendering to a project like this means "breaking" methods and "destabilizing" genres). One is an intellectual journey of learning about the trajectory of Virginia's own final journey as a persistent (slow) composer challenged by her aging literacy. And one is a journey of feeling, which saturates, complicates, and potentiates the others even when largely tacit.

IV.

The nature of a project conducted in the time frame of "slow composing" means that what I have to say here about specific methods depends tacitly on the larger body of data, knowledge bases, and conceptual constructs I am building for the project, not just those that are named or cited in this essay. But I can foreground the most explicit research practices and knowledges that played a significant role in the claims and insights presented here. They depend, first, on empirically reconstructing timelines: for my mother's life and literacy during the decades she worked on *Parenting* and for her composing process. For the late-life timeline, I selected from multiple streams of data I was gathering, studying, integrating, and triangulating for biographical/autobiographical purposes, attending to some types or parts specific to this period of her life. Sources I tapped for information included (not exhaustively) photos, correspondence, emails, packing lists, calendars, family documents and records, medical information and records, personal communication with family and friends, and writings by family members. I wrote journals to recapture my own memories and consulted family members about theirs. For her composing process, I gathered (and archived) materials like drafts, notebooks, outlines, reading notes, saved articles and poems, quotations, any kinds of notes (scraps, post-its), files—most of these undated and many of them partial, jumbled, and disorganized. I used visualization (diagrams, charts, drawings) to date, correlate, and record this information as timelines and to serve as a discovery process for their meaning. At first just heuristics for myself, as I charted relations through an ecological lens, my visualizations became a hermeneutical tool to discern patterns in the data and, ultimately, to embody and communicate their discovered meanings.

I want to comment on the quality of the evidence that allows me to construct these timelines with some confidence as to their meaning and its bearing on my research question. Given the complexity of an ecology, it's impossible to identify all the interdependent forces and factors that contributed to Virginia's aging literacy and composing potential. So the question is, how can I confidently discern patterns in data that is necessarily incomplete?

Setting aside the fact that in both principle and practice no one could give a comprehensive account, I do want to acknowledge circumstances and conditions that limited the data I could gather. First, this is a retrospective study. During the period of Virginia's life I'm examining, my relationship to her was as a daughter, not researcher; I decided to undertake this project only after her death. I didn't, therefore, make systematic observations, collect documents (until after she died), or interview her—as I now wish I could—to deepen my understanding of how she perceived her life events and literacy activities.

Second, I lived in close proximity to my mother sporadically, depending on our geographical locations, work and travel schedules, and (in later years) her needs for caregiving. During the early years of her writing *Parenting* I spent one sabbatical semester living with my parents, but otherwise visited on holidays and kept in touch by phone. After they moved into their son's home (2003), we continued our holiday visits and, after retiring in 2009, my husband and I became part of the family network of caregivers. As my work and our own health permitted, we made short, frequent visits and brought her to visit us for up to two weeks at a time.

A further challenge is that I'm not a natural observer and have always had a poor memory for the detail of places, events, dates, and conversations. For these reasons I've drawn my data (direct and inferred) about Virginia's late life as much as possible from concrete contemporaneous sources like emails, photos, calendars, notes, and various other kinds of documentation, including her own and family writings, using various clues to date them. I tried to check memories—my own and others— by triangulating them against one another and other evidence. In the case of her composing process for *Parenting* I have some of the same limitations in terms of direct observation, but a great deal of material evidence.

Despite these limitations, in tracing her aging literacy and her composing process over time, I have some incomparable advantages as Virginia's daughter, literacy partner, and part of the family's caregiving network in her later years. In the latter capacity, I helped with everything from medical care to shopping and followed her emotional well-being through frequent calls, emails, texts, and our visits. After her move in 2003 and increasingly as she aged, I became literally part of her extended, distributed literacy system. As such, I recognize obstacles, disruptors, or constraints as well as affordances and resources (many of them provided by me) for my mother's aging literacy. Because of our deep bonds and the continual interweaving of our lives, I can interpret and extrapolate from incomplete, scattered data to discern patterns that no

> *"Because of our deep bonds and the continual interweaving of our lives, I can interpret and extrapolate from incomplete, scattered data to discern patterns that no one else could."*

one else could. I am in a unique position to bear witness to the transitions and transformations that shaped my mother's life trajectory during the period of composing her last essay.

V.

In trying to understand why Virginia was unable to complete her last essay in late age, I realized that many, by default, would assume the simplest, most obvious explanation is dementia. But I instinctively resisted this way of accounting for the complexity of her aging literacy. It didn't match my own observations of her literate capabilities up to very late in life, and I was suspicious that this label is applied too loosely to aging patients without medical studies to support diagnosis of an underlying disease. As Louise Aronson suggests (56), in popular use (and even for many doctors) it serves as a metaphor for old age, encouraging a dismissive view of older adults' mental and emotional life, and even of their physical complaints. (Despite Virginia's fortunate circumstances and strong family support, I observed how unconscious cultural stereotypes and assumptions about aging made some medical providers inattentive to her needs and poor listeners to her self-reported problems). I was also concerned that the term attributes behaviors solely to changes in the brain in isolation from body and environment, failing to acknowledge complex interactions and reciprocal relationships among them.

But because both doctors and family members assumed Virginia had dementia (presumably Alzheimer's), I felt I had to consider seriously whether and how such a diagnosis might help me answer my question as to why she didn't finish a composing task that obviously meant so much to her, and in which she persisted to a very late age. So I sought out characterizations (scientific and narrative) of dementia from multiple perspectives: nurses, doctors, neuroscientists, psychologists, advocacy groups, caregivers and family members, dementia patients themselves. I read compelling critiques of the concept, treatment by the medical community, and cultural attitudes toward it; and current expert views on dementia (and cognitive aging, in general). My overall impression echoed one of my mother's favorite maxims, as illustrated in Figure 2: "It's not as simple as you think."
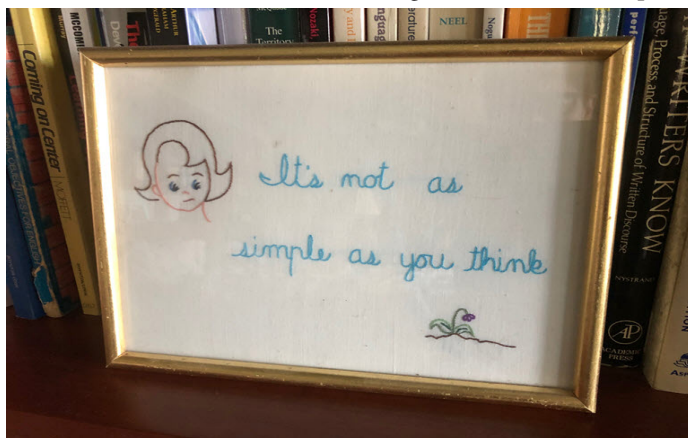

Figure 2. "It's not as simple as you think."

Since the 1980s, when Thomas Kitwood's person-centered approach revolutionized thinking about dementia and its care, studies of dementia have advanced and complicated understandings of it from three broad perspectives, currently brought together in "holistic" views: biomedical, psychological, and critical gerontological. There are still ambiguities in distinguishing between normal cognitive aging and cognitive decline due to neuropathologies. The symptoms and conditions that define dementia as a clinical syndrome can manifest for many reasons other than a neurogenerative disease—infections, nutritional deficiencies, side effects of medications, depression. It is also recognized that biological, psychological, sociocultural, and other environmental factors interact with changes in the brain or nervous system to affect mentation. I had no way of knowing in Virginia's case whether, how, and especially when her age-related changes added up to a technical diagnosis of "dementia."

But I chose not to label my mother's aging as dementia for reasons that go beyond uncertainty about the diagnosis. First, it's a blunt instrument for answering my questions about her aging literacy. It doesn't tell me what she could and couldn't do, why, or when, especially in relationship to other internal and external influences that I might be able to identify. Second, I believe that any diagnosis of dementia would apply only after late 2012, when (as explained below), I place the moment that she became unable to complete the essay, although her composing efforts continued beyond that point. Up to that time, I have evidence that her literacy abilities (viewed as a system) were intact, although not able, in Marc E. Agronin's words (writing about Erik Erikson at the end of his life), "to participate verbally and intellectually at the high level of discourse and writing" (78) she had enjoyed at her peak. So, instead of medicalizing my mother's aging literacy, I take my cue from Reeve Lindbergh's writing about her mother Anne Lindbergh when she chooses phenomenological over medical language to describe her mother's late life after several strokes. I chose to observe (retrospectively) and document in as much detail as possible the ways that brain, body, and environment were coactive in my mother's literacy aging and resilience.

Beyond the reasons given, this approach reflects a long-held philosophical stance—contextualist and dialogic—that grounds an ecological perspective on human life and development (Phelps, *Composition*). In contrast to largely brain-based ways of construing aging, I view the person, her development, and her literacy ecosystemically: which is to say, as an embodied, distributed system of multicausal, reciprocal relations among brain, body, and environment (Bronfenbrenner; Overton, and Molenaar). This conceptual framework profoundly influenced the way I searched for, named, perceived, and valued data about Virginia's aging literacy: more specifically, how I came to visualize it in ways that became themselves findings and interpretations. It is essential to understanding what I believe this data *means*.

To explain in what sense my conceptual framework is "ecological," I need to situate it comparatively within the current landscape of ecological scholarship in rhetoric and composition. While I have affinities with this work and share many of its theoretical influences, my ecological approach has been shaped for different objects of study, by a network of sources suited to my purposes. For the same reasons, the following synthesis of ecodevelopmental principles may be productive for other

scholars who need theories that afford lifespan research on writers, their writings, and their literacy and rhetorical development.

VI.

As Laurie Gries observes, ecological views are now ubiquitous in studies of rhetoric and writing:

Since the 1980s, *ecology* has gained much capital as a metaphor and a model in the study of rhetoric and writing. *Ecology* is predicated on the belief that biological and social worlds are jointly composed of dynamic networks of organisms and environments that exist on multiple scales and are interdependent, diverse, and responsive to feedback. In simplest terms, to consider something as ecological is to recognize its vital implication in networked systems of relations (Bennett, Syverson). In less simple terms, thinking ecologically acknowledges the dynamic complexity of these networked systems, the interrelated, laminated layers of activities that constitute them, and the mutual transformation that occurs among intertwined elements. (67)

As Gries acknowledges, applications of ecological thinking in the field of rhetoric and composition/writing studies are quite diverse, both in terms of what scholars hope to characterize or explain (their objects of study) and in the theories they invoke and borrow from to theorize these phenomena (systems). So, for example, contributors to the collection in which Gries's comments appear (Dobrin, *Writing*) focus on either "writing" or "rhetoric" as a system or ecology. As explained in the editor's introduction, this work springs from "a convergence between complex ecologies, writing studies, and new-media/post-media. In this convergence, network theories, systems theories, complex ecologies, and posthumanist theories emerge as paramount in the shaping of writing theory" (Dobrin, "Ecology" 2). These scholars see their work as motivated by the complexities added to writing (or rhetoric) as systems by digital and new media technologies that have transformed "the invention, production, circulation, remix, and recirculation of writing" (7). Still other scholars have sought to "think ecologically" about writing programs (Cox, Galin, and Melzer; Phelps, "Between Smoke"; Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser).

Hannah Rule, in forwarding a "situated" theory of writing processes that emphasizes their physical, material qualities as an immediate, embodied and emplaced experience, argues that many contemporary theories influencing rhetoric and composition/writing studies (post-process, new materialist, post-humanist, cultural-historical activity, actor-network), especially when identified as "ecological," tend to "zoom out" to macro-scales in characterizing the situatedness of writing activity (49–70). In doing so they can decenter or elide human subjects and their agency as well as "preclude. . . the study of writing's radically local physical-material situations," what she calls the micro-view (54). Certainly, this is the case with many ecological views of writing and rhetoric, since they take the system at its widest possible reach as their subject: in John Tinnell's language, they seek a position or methodology "with which we may discuss writing as an ecological phenomenon without recourse to individualized entities such as writer, reader, text, etc." (130).

I value the macro-studies of writing, literacy, and rhetoric ecologies, including the way they and

the theories they draw on have expanded and transformed notions of agency. However, to think ecologically doesn't require limiting our objects of study to the macro-scale, nor does focusing on persons as objects of ecological study limit us to the micro-scale, since human beings are themselves self-organizing systems, which are constituted and experienced in and across multiple time scales. (Rule makes this point herself, arguing for a "modulation or continuum of focus on micro- and macro-situated forces" [(62] whose dynamic is revealed in studying the composing moment.) In fact, human development has been studied for decades from an ecological perspective. My particular interest is the scale of the life span, and the theories I've sought out are those that help me study persons and their literacies as they develop over long spans of time. In the case of the current study, that is my mother Virginia's literacy over several decades, but in my memoir it will be a dyad, mother and daughter, over shared lifetimes linked by literacy experiences, texts, reciprocal learning, and dialogue. Developmental theories provide the center for a network of theories that help bring ecological perspectives to these goals and objects of study.

My own lifetime work as a scholar has deep roots in studies of human development, which have evolved radically (as a multidisciplinary enterprise) since I first encountered them more than 40 years ago in the philosophical context of contextualism. In addition, recent attention to lifespan studies of writing and literacy has provided a new context for ecodevelopmental perspectives to flourish within the field (Bazerman et al., *Lifespan Development*; Dieppe and Phillips, *Approaches*; Driscoll and Zhang; Smith and Prior; Pinkert and Bowen; Roozen and Erikson). What I'd like to do here is to lay out, without detailing all the scholarship that contributes to my view, some major principles that provide affordances for my own project. In doing so, it will be clear how many features in ecodevelopmental theories echo the qualities attributed to ecological thinking in other regions of the field.

In preview, the principles I draw from these theories offer a rich conceptual framework for studying an individual ecologically: as embodied; as unique; as having agency (while understanding agency as distributed); as a set of interpenetrating contexts (internal and external); as a system (of systems, within systems); as changing and developing over a lifetime. This framework affords description and analysis of a person's literacy (and aging) as something not contained within an individual's head (i.e., cognitive or brain-based) but fully embodied, material, sociocultural: constituted by a system of complex, changing interdependencies.

1. Developmental (bioecological or ecosystemic) theories are person-oriented, interested in studying how individuals develop over the lifespan. In Urie Bronfenbrenner's mature Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model for developmental research, the person is the "center of gravity" of the system, composed of 1) the developmental process, "involving the fused and dynamic relation of the individual and the context" (symbolized as person <> context); 2) the biopsychosocial, historical person; 3) the context, conceived as laminated systems or levels of an ecology (from immediate to remote environments); and time, understood as multiscalar (summarized by Lerner, "Urie" xv-xx).

2. The person is defined as an active organism engaging an active context, which enables a conception of human agency that is compatible with a distributed view of agency. In Willis F. Overton's relational-developmental systems approach, "the system's [person's] development occurs

through its own embodied activities and actions operating coactively in a lived world of physical and sociocultural objects, according to the principle of probabilistic epigenesis (12), [meaning that] "the role played by any part process of a relational developmental system—gene, cell, organ, organism, physical environment, culture—is a function of all of the interpenetrating and coacting part processes of the system" (52).

3. Developmental theories emphasize how these complex interdependencies, as they enter into an unfolding history of change over time, make each human being's life trajectory and personhood unique. Tania Zittoun, Jaan Valsiner, Dankeert Vedeler, João Salgado, Miguel M. Gonçalves, and Dieter Ferring call this uniqueness an individual's "melody of living" (1–2).

4. Ecodevelopmental theories participate in a broader base of scholarship that highlights time (its levels, scales, cycles, and rhythms) as an essential, profound, and complex aspect of human experience (Adam; Lemke; Thibault; Madsen, and Cowley). Developmental science "emphasizes the dynamic interplay of processes across time frames, levels of analysis, and contexts. . . . Units of focus can be as short as milliseconds, seconds, and minutes, or as long as years, decades, and millennia. In this perspective, the phenomena of individual functioning are viewed at multiple levels—from the subsystems of genetics, neurobiology, and hormones to those of families, social networks, communities, and cultures" (Carolina Consortium on Development 1). It is very challenging to explain the role and relations among multiple time scales in human lives: how they are coordinated, negotiated, and experienced—subjectively and intersubjectively; how they operate interdependently in a given moment, over a lifespan, within historical cohorts, and across generations. This challenge has been a major theme of life course studies (Elder), including the principle of studying linked lives within and among generations (in literacy studies, see Brandt, *Literacy*; "Writing"; in writing studies, Elliot and Horning). In lifespan studies, Paul Prior has critiqued views that simplify and fix relations between micro and macro "structures," often identified with vertically nested time scales; he argues for a much more complex temporality of becoming, wherein "a local moment participates in chronotopic flows" ("How Moments" 10).

It's not surprising that developmental studies would have to engage deeply with time within an ecological perspective, given the time frame of a lifetime as a starting point and the necessary extension of contexts in both time and space (as noted earlier, zooming out to larger and slower systems, as well as zooming in to the tiniest and fastest ones). One consequence has been the realization that the human being "is not definable at a single instance in time, but only over finite time-intervals, and in fact ultimately only as a *trajectory entity* [my emphasis] developing and individuating through its interactions with its environment over the whole lifespan course from conception to decay" (Lemke 283). Hence the emphasis on life and development as a process of "becoming" (Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, and Ferring; in writing studies, the work of Prior and Roozen.)

5. Last, as demonstrated by Zittoun and her colleagues (a multidisciplinary group of European scholars), among others, developmental theories are hospitable to semiotic theories: indeed, these scholars argue for their integration to explain the uniqueness of human lives and developmental trajectories. They position their inquiry as beginning with two assumptions: "*the irreversibility of time* and the *semiotic nature of making sense of our human experience*," requiring a dialogue between two

theoretical traditions, a developmental science and a sociocultural psychology (12). These traditions define two complementary perspectives for developmental study, the more objective "outside" view of the natural scientist and the "inside" phenomenological or subjective (semiotically mediated) view. Ultimately this distinction is heuristic, since only together do they account for human development as a "dynamic unity" of mutually constitutive domains (32). This makes Zittoun and her colleagues' particular version of developmental theory very congenial for a project studying literacy development and lifespan writing.

Some of the developmental premises I've named already are suggestive for how to conduct my own study, but I want to add a few others with methodological implications. First, the complexity of ecological reciprocities, interpenetrations, and coactions (terms that have replaced "interaction" in developmental science) and the concept of a living organism as an open system (nonlinear, adaptive, self-organizing, self-regulating) have led scholars to reject linear causality in favor of nonlinear systemic patterns of change (emergent, transformational). Instead of "causes" they identify functions like affordances, resources, or assets along with conditions, obstacles, disruptors, or constraints (Overton; Zittoun et al.). I adopt this language to analyze my mother's aging literacy and answer my research questions here.

Second, the question arises, when you understand any phenomenon as fundamentally relational and systemic, how you can distinguish between a system and its environment? Zittoun and her colleagues acknowledge the dynamic wholeness of person and environment as a single system (often symbolized as person <> context), but agree with other scholars that we can define borders flexibly depending on what we are researching, and thus at what level or scale we define "the system" (e.g., a person, a dyad, a community) in distinction from its "environment" (Zittoun et al. 41–42[ii]). In addition, a given study may choose to focus on what Bronfenbrenner calls the "immediate environment" (the "microsystem") or on relations to layers of the remote environment (as in Elder's life course studies examining the impact on individuals and cohorts of growing up in different historical worlds).

Various considerations have led me in this part of my project to focus on my mother's relations to her immediate environment, especially as it afforded or constrained her ability to complete her essay in late age. To do this, I will at times draw the border between Virginia as organism (brain-body) and her physical, material, and sociocultural environment. At the same time, in attributing qualities to her life, activity, or experience, I always understand them relationally, as a nexus of forces—biological, neurological, interpersonal, sociocultural, material, spatiotemporal, and more. As Timo Järvilehto puts it regarding cognition, "'All concepts referring to mental activity—like perception, emotion, memory, etc.—describe only different aspects of the organization and dynamics of the whole organism-environment system'" (330, qtd. in Steffenson and Pederson 95).

Within this framework, then, "aging literacy" refers here to the dynamic of my mother's literacy system in late age, understood as historically formed habits, skills, and knowledge (assets) coupled with contextual affordances and constraints, all subject to complex, interdependent change over time. At any point on the timeline, the quality and accessibility of her coactive internal and external resources defines Virginia's potential for continuing to engage in processes directed to her composing task.

VII.

From the larger body of data I was collecting for the whole project, I selected and searched for further information about the ecology of my mother's work on the unfinished essay, guided by an ecodevelopmental lens in trying to understand the dynamic of Virginia's aging literacy system. Among other things, that lens directed my attention to timelines in her life and her slow composing, reflecting a lifespan framework that foregrounds change over time in all aspects of a writer's ecology. Mapping these timelines not only provided representations of data, they revealed relationships that make sense of it. In effect, my graphs became findings that serve as their own interpretations. To introduce these maps and discuss their meanings, I return to Figure 1, displayed again below, which visualizes the relationship between Virginia's composing task and her aging literacy over time as a relationship between a rising line—representing the increasing scope and complexity of her task—and a falling line, a composite, abstract representation of her aging literacy.
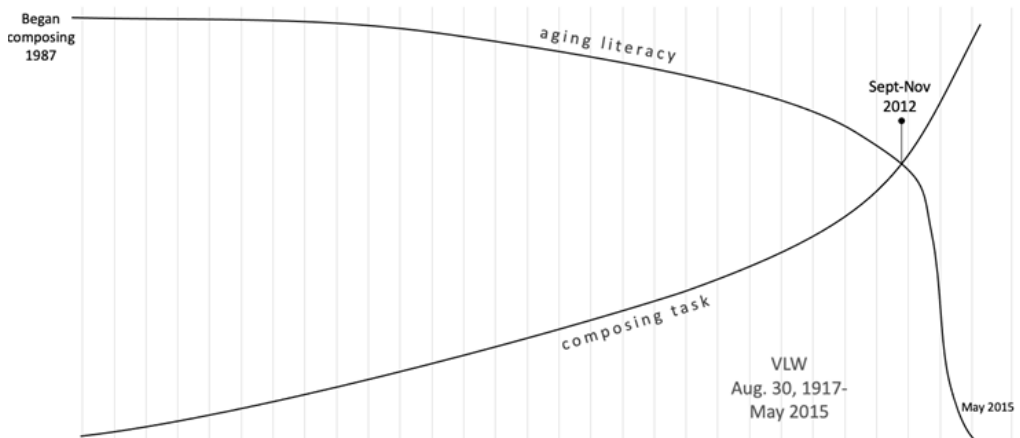
Figure 1 (reprinted). Intersection of VLW's composing task and her aging literacy.

I propose that the intersection the rising and falling lines mark the moment—between September and November 2012—when Virginia could no longer bounce back to a literacy level sufficient to carry out her plan.

The visualizations that follow represent interpretations of the falling line of aging literacy (as constituted by episodic changes and entropy), juxtaposed with a timeline of Virginia's composing process for her unfinished essay.

In Figures 3 and 4, I interpret the composite falling line of aging literacy in terms of two forces

of decline: episodic changes, where a time-specific event or change in condition causes shocks and stresses to the system; and slower, indeterminate ones reflecting entropy in the system, like age-related decline in structures and functions of the brain and body, chronic health conditions, and environmental changes.

The episodic timeline (Figure 3) visualizes the pattern of "bouncing back" from shocks or stresses that disrupt my mother's literacy.

Graph designed with Derek Mueller
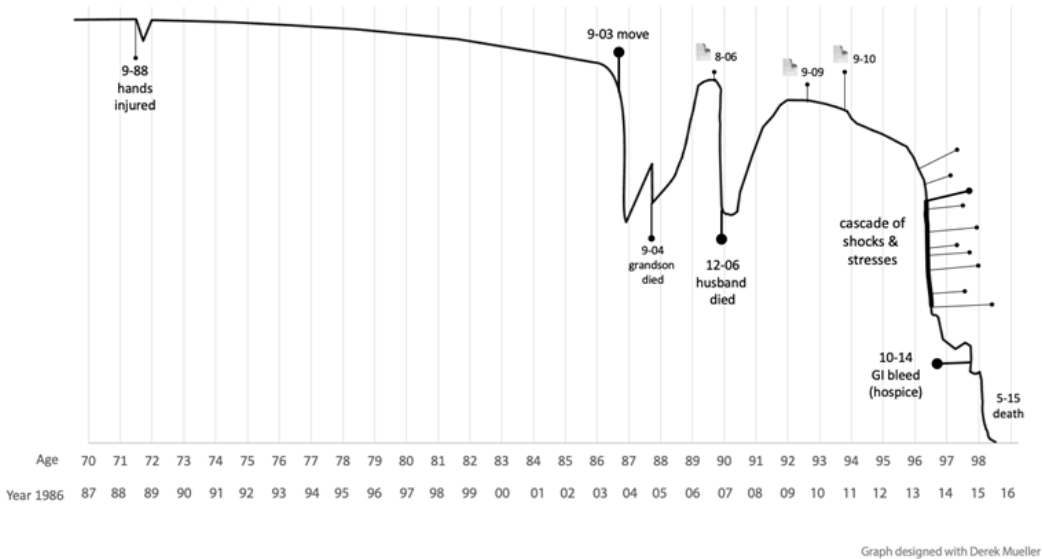
Figure 3. Episodic timeline of VLW's aging literacy.

In constructing this timeline, it was impractical to visualize even all the data I do have about the time-specific stresses and shocks that acted as disruptors for Virginia's literacy. Major examples (events with prolonged impact) that I documented fall into several categories: health (injuries and illness); relationships (absence, loss, or disconnection from loved persons, pets, and even objects); and relocation from her own home, a watershed moment for any older adult. These are exemplified in the timeline, but zooming in would reveal the strains and upsets that create ups and downs in every life from day to day, fluctuating in levels of intensity and duration. In frail old age, minor stresses may be magnified in their physical and emotional impact. Overall, such stresses impair literacy capability in multiple ways, from physical disability, cognitive loss, anxieties, and emotional distress to diminished control over one's environment.

The graph in Figure 3 identifies selected instances where an event shocks or stresses Virginia's literacy, shown as a dip or drop in the line. The line turns upward toward a higher literacy level (meaning more active and more productive) as she bounces back. How low it goes, and how fast she bounces back, depends on the severity of the shock; where she is on the timeline of aging; interaction with other stresses; and counterforces that strengthen resilience. Overall, the pattern resembles a bouncing ball that bounces back lower and lower each time until finally it runs out of energy.

In 1988, early in Virginia's project, a tree fell on her car as she was driving and landed on her hands, causing loss of one finger and permanent damage to others. After several months of recovery she bounced back to her former high literacy level, reading at her usual pace and scope, typing (on an old Smith-Corona typewriter), working on the essay intensively throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. But in 2003 my parents gave up driving and moved from a large house with an extensive library and office into a compact suite of rooms in the home of my brother and his wife. Her literacy work was disrupted while she slowly reestablished a niche for reading and writing in their main living space, into which my brother had fitted a scaled-down version of the office—desks, computer, files, bookshelves—my parents had shared. Once settled in (with a fraction of her old library), she continued to expand her reading material (new books, daily newspapers, journals, and magazines, internet downloads) and restarted work on the essay.

The episodic timeline (figure 4) shows her bouncing back after two deeply affecting deaths—a grandson only a year later, in 2004, and her husband in late 2006, to resume her normal reading habits and produce drafts in 2006, 2009, and 2010. However, she became frailer in the next few years and starting in late 2012 experienced a cascade of physical, cognitive, and emotional stresses, including a serious illness lasting from April to August 2013. (This marks a difficult transitional period of increasing dependence, culminating in the need for professional caregivers.) After that, in late old age the dips turn into a steeper falling line, the bounce-backs diminishing, until the line flattens as she approaches end of life. After an uptick in health and literacy activity between June and October 2014 (which I attribute to a dedicated caregiver), a catastrophic internal bleed put her in hospice that October. Even then she recovered enough to bounce back a little, still reading as late as December.

Despite persistent bounce-backs, the overall declining pattern in her resilience reflects two facts. First, any event or condition that causes major stress has ripple effects and lasting consequences. Virginia had to cope the rest of her life with damaged fingers, the loss of loved ones, and the effects of her move in 2003, all impacting her literacy. In late old age, some health events become chronic, chronic conditions worsen, and stresses combine and cumulate to create cascades. The cascade that accelerated her decline included, for instance, episodes where frustration with malfunctioning technology (phones, computers) undermined her increasingly tenuous grasp on long-held skills she relied on to communicate. Accumulating health problems not only made her increasingly fragile but created stresses around the logistics of marshalling family help to monitor her needs and medications, make appointments, and transport her—in the case of her serious infection, to administer IV antibiotics at home.

Second, shadowing the episodic timeline and invisibly shaping its curve downward is the aging effect of entropy, initially slow, then accelerating, as different elements of the body-mind-environment system lose order and function. Figure 4 visualizes its gradual decline as a system capable of literate

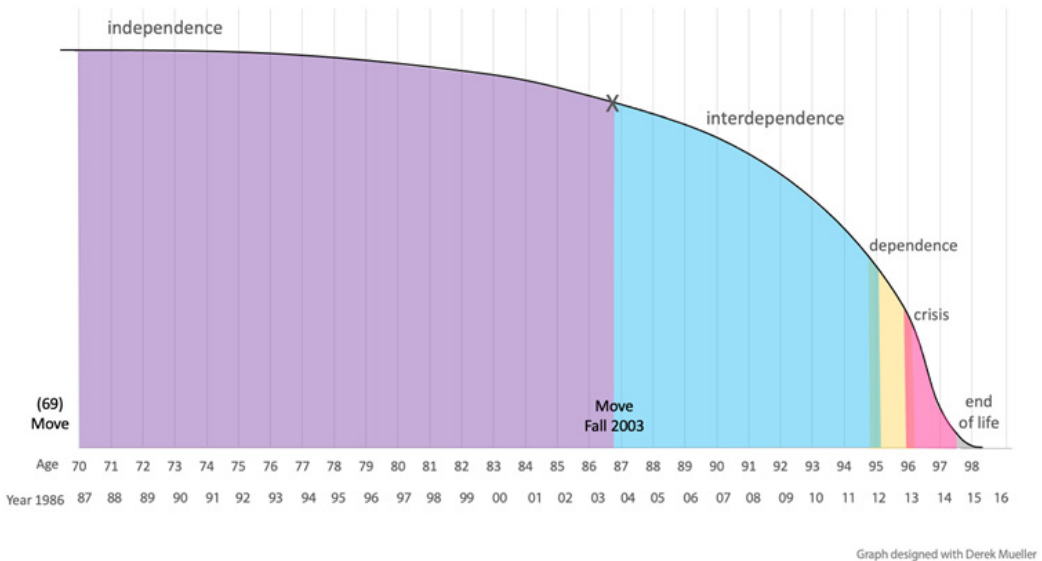activity and, specifically, Virginia's composing task.

Figure 4. Entropy of aging (VLW).

My assumption of decade-by-decade steady losses is oversimplified, as studies of aging differentiate numerous structures and functions, each aging at different rates and peaking at different ages, variable among individuals (Bjorklund; Gutchess; Harada, Love, and Triebel; Hartshorne and Germine). Further, the period of life after seventy-five or eighty is the least studied and the least well understood. But, since no one did clinical observations or diagnoses of all these changes, in assuming that entropy does take its slow toll on my mother, I'm recognizing that she was like all mortals subject to progressive physical and cognitive aging, although the composing evidence suggests that the sharp decline in abilities predicted by seventy-five or eighty happened as much as a decade later for her. The colors in figure 5 reflect my best estimate of her passage from independence to interdependence (sharply demarcated by the move in 2003) and then more indeterminate passages between interdependence and dependence in 2012 and between dependence and crisis in 2013.

I tried visualizing entropy of the body, brain, and environment in more detail, but gave up not only because of the complexity of tracing so many strands of change, but also because so much of it is either impossible to directly observe (neural changes) or so slow as to be imperceptible or very hard to date. But the signs accumulated that she was losing ground: her declining mobility, balance, and stamina; her recurrent efforts to relearn fading technology skills; her loss of prospective memory for future events; the deterioration in her workspace as more and more clippings, books, papers, and notes overflowed beyond her capacity to keep them organized. She knew it, and counted on me to help her preserve, restore, compensate, or adapt to these losses in her ecology (see Rumsey; Bowen, "Age Identity"). These gradual changes surfaced in my data as moments when I took steps to slow down or offset them: for example, balance exercises, a cane, calendar help, storage and memory aids.

The inferences I was able to make from these clues guided me in determining the transitions from interdependence to dependence to crisis to end of life.

Figure 5 shows a composing trajectory for Virginia's unfinished essay on parenting that I painstakingly reconstructed from evidence completely independent of how I established the episodic timeline:
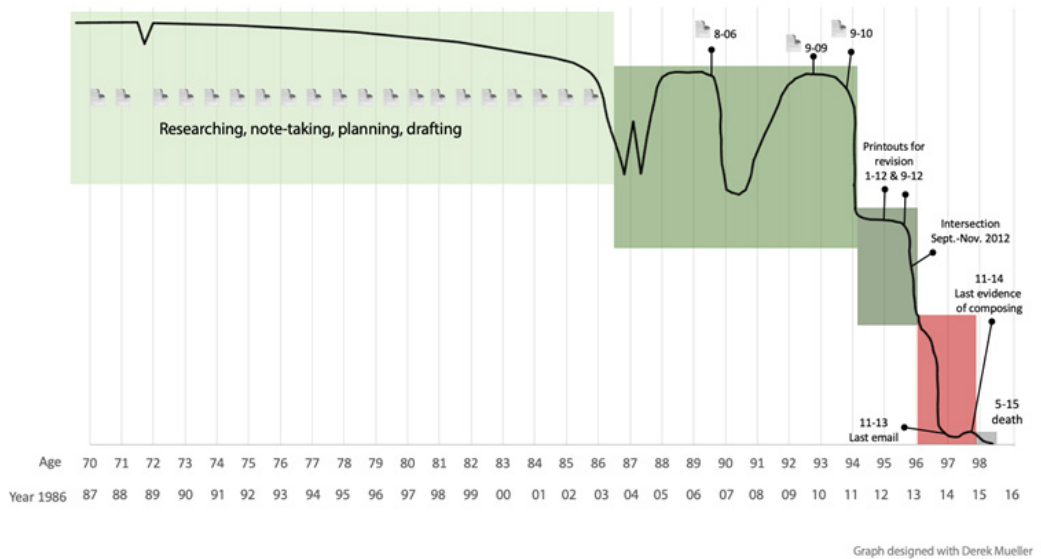
Figure 5. Composing trajectory and levels (*Parenting*).

The dips here are pauses or disruptions of her composing; the highs represent active composing at some level. The colors distinguish four levels of composing differing in intensity, continuity, and type of product (from full drafts to clippings and saved quotes.)

You might wonder how I know when she was composing. To determine this, which depends on what counts as composing, I defined composing as "intention and attention" directed at her composing task, made evident in activity (mental, physical, material) I could observe or infer. At level one, she was at her highest literacy level, giving intensive, sustained attention to her task over sixteen years of research, reading, notetaking, and drafting. At level two, after moving in 2003, she had significant disruptions and less control of a more constrained environment but was still able to continue reading (at the same pace) and (more slowly than at level one) researching, drafting new sections, and revising previous ones. At level three, in 2011 and 2012, her intention remained strong, and she worked persistently and productively at her task, although likely at a slower pace and in shorter micro-events of composing. In this period she gave sustained attention to revisions and replanning, materialized in a body of notes, outlines, and annotations on drafts, focused on the goal of finishing the essay. She continued her habits of mining reading and other sources for possible additions (new ideas, information, quotations, citations) to the essay. However, she could

no longer muster the cognitive resources or sustained time and energy to execute these plans. In level four (2013-2014) she hadn't given up her intention, although it was weakened (the clippings and quotations I found suggested her thoughts were turning to the circle of life and the prospect of death). But her attention to the composing task was very intermittent, brief, witnessed in scattered clippings, quotes, post-it notes, notecards, and stray pieces of paper with key words on them. Some articles saved in late 2014 are my last evidence of her intention and attention to composing the essay.

I was amazed to discover, as shown in figure 6, how closely her composing tracked the episodic timeline, showing the degree to which the stresses and shocks to the ecology of her aging literacy directly affected her composing trajectory. I've put the two graphs together to demonstrate how they follow the same bounce-back pattern:
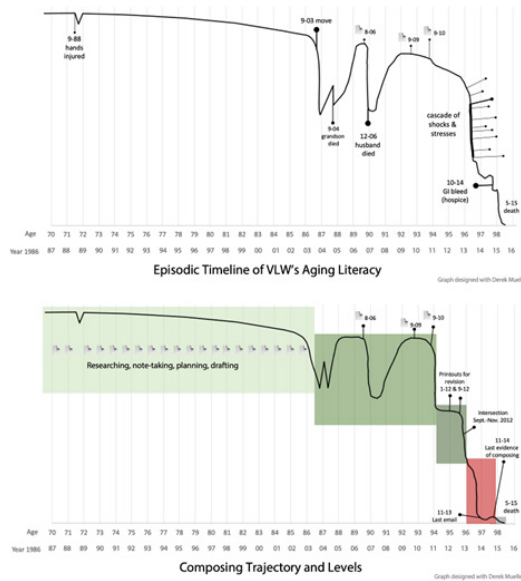
Figure 6. Episodic timeline and composing trajectory in figures 4 and 5 compared.

The gradual slope of decline in the entropy diagram (see figure 4 above), moving from independence to interdependence to dependence to crisis, is echoed in the four levels of composing.

The mapping methods that proved so fruitful in this study looked at my mother's aging literacy and late-life composing from what my co-author Derek Mueller calls the "middle altitude," positioning the researcher's gaze at a "middle distance" to "attend to patterned movement" that is not visible at the extremes of far away or close up (Mueller, Williams, Phelps, and Clary-Lemon 10). This language reflects a "networked methodological approach" introduced in our collaborative research on cross-border networks in writing studies (6–12). In defining this approach to studying a complex, interconnected phenomenon, we are tackling a problem that has been a major focus of early lifespan writing studies, whose scholars have repeatedly argued that the complexity and diversity of writing development (lifespan and lifewide) requires multi-disciplinary, multi-site

study from a great range of methodological perspectives (Bazerman et al., *Lifespan Development*; Dippre and Phillips, *Approaches*). But historic "conflicts of method" among disciplinary and national research traditions pose the problem of how to achieve what Dippre and Phillips call an "actionable coherence" in the knowledges they produce. The networked methodological approach proposes that one way to do so is to frame relations among methods as complementary in terms of variations in scale (distance versus close) and scope or aperture (wide versus narrow) (Mueller, Williams, Phelps, and Clary-Lemon 9). (These variations can also implicate the range of time: see Lemke on time scales in research methods). Juxtaposing, coordinating, and interconnecting these scales and lenses, as we did in our collaboration studying cross-border networks, allowed us to align and integrate forms of knowledge at different distances.

The middle altitude of this study facilitated remarkable, surprising discoveries of longitudinal patterns over more than two decades of Virginia's literacy life, but it needs to be complemented by ecological analyses at a more granular level. I plan such an analysis focusing on Virginia's "writing habitat" (Alexis) after her transition to living in my brother's home, zooming in to examine the evolving relations between her aging body-mind and changes in the material surround for her composing after the move. I'll draw on methods exemplified by Cydney Alexis, Lauren Marshall Bowen ("Age Identity"; "Literacy Tours"), and other scholars of material culture who view cognition, literacy, and rhetorical practices as distributed within ecologies of human and non-human agents. In Virginia's writing habitat, an assemblage of space and materials served as prostheses for her body-mind; one goal is to examine how changes in this material environment as resources for her literacy practices are interdependent and reciprocal with changes in her embodied cognition. But, beyond their practical functionality, new materialist scholars highlight humans' deep emotional investments and identifications with objects they assemble around them and use over time. I will look at this changing landscape of "evocative objects" in my mother's final writing habitat through the lens of Jennifer A. Gonzalez's rich concept of an "autotopography": for the writer, a "visual and tactile map" of a writing space populated with material objects and tools that have become imbued with feeling and personal meaning, expressing a writer's identity through their affordance and participation in her embodied, affective experiences of composing (134).

VIII.

A serendipitous event (disrupting my journey late in writing this piece) subtly shifted my "sense of an ending"—to my mother's life, to this essay—adding more dialogic threads to its texture. Reliving the details of her life in old age, handling the books and objects she surrounded herself with, hearing her voice in emails and composing notes, all attuned me acutely to her individuality: I listened to her distinctive melody of living. But by the time I wrote my first version of an ending, I was struck by how her story resonated with others' experiences of old age, recounted in studies and narratives I had read: now I saw in her life universal dimensions in the human experience of aging. Then a chance event—watching a webinar on healthy cognitive aging—threw new light on this gestalt shift and indeed on everything I had observed and visualized in my mother's aging. I could no longer end my

essay at that moment in my journey: I had to write an ending to share this discovery and the way it refigured the intellectual and emotional dynamics of the essay.

Fittingly, insight came in an iconic form. In her webinar Quinn Kennedy presented this diagram (figure 7), comparing two hypothetical individuals in terms of their "cognitive reserve," to explain the variability in people's experiences of cognitive decline:
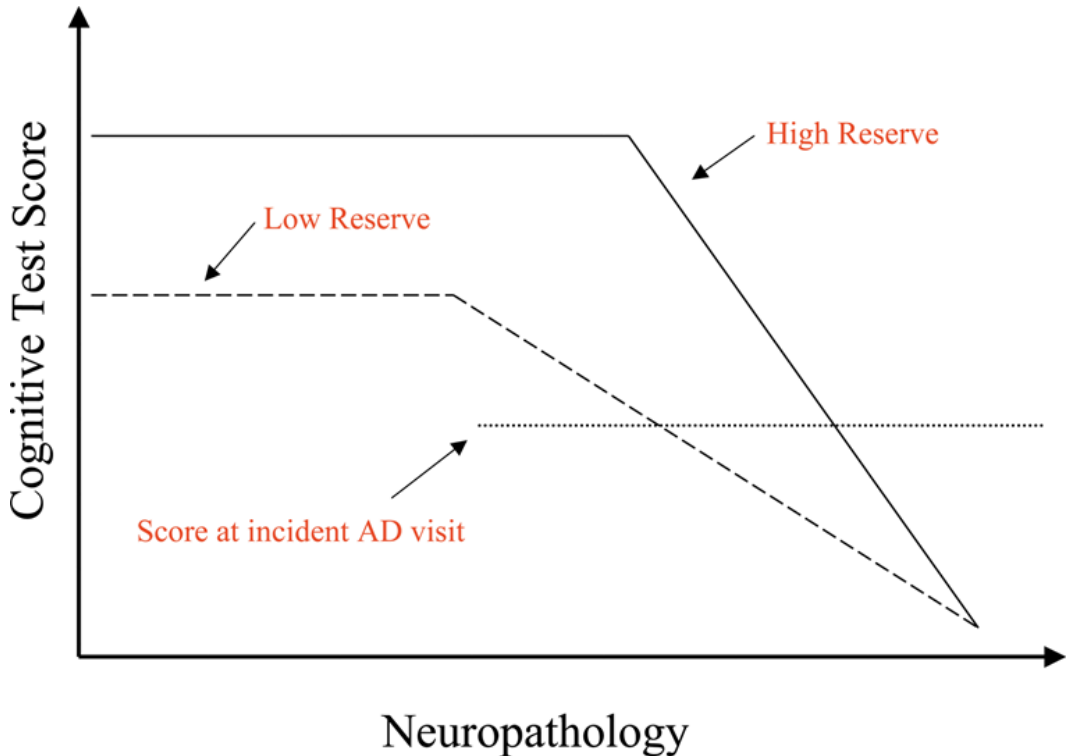
Figure 7. Variability in cognitive reserve (Stern 2012).

Kennedy explained that in research on cognitive aging "cognitive reserve" refers to how efficiently and flexibly you use your brain, helping to compensate for the age-related accumulation of neurodegenerative changes in the brain (Stern; Tucker and Stern; Resilience Workgroup). Having high cognitive reserve maximizes individuals' cognitive potential over the lifespan; it slows or delays the onset of cognitive decline, reduces the risk of dementia, and may even prevent neuropathologies. Kennedy went on to summarize substantial evidence that, even as older adults, we can preserve healthy brain function to later ages by behaviors that enhance cognitive reserve: among these, she emphasized physical exercise and cognitive stimulation through learning new skills.

I immediately identified the trajectory of high cognitive reserve with my mother's late-life experience—it was a stunningly close match to my visualizations of her aging literacy shown in figures 3–5. The timeline I reconstructed corresponds uncannily to the last fifteen years of the hypothetical woman with high cognitive reserve in Kennedy's interpretation of figure 7: like her, Virginia functioned well until beginning to decline five years before death and spent the last 2 and

½ years in professional care. What would it mean to recognize my mother as a person whose aging reflects high cognitive reserve? I was intensely curious to learn more about this phenomenon.

I followed a citation trail that led me to Christopher Herzog, Arthur F. Kramer, Robert S. Wilson, and Ulman Lindenberger's (2009) synthesis of empirical research supporting the more general hypothesis that individuals can positively influence cognitive aging by engaging in activities of "cognitive enrichment," including physical, social, and intellectual activities (3). In the conceptual framework they propose, there is a "zone of possible development" for a person's cognitive potential at any age, "a form of behavioral plasticity that is continuously reshaped by the individual's environmental context, biological state, health, and cognition-relevant behaviors" (4). This zone defines a range of "possible selves" or life trajectories that lie between the lower and upper boundaries of the zone (8). Individuals' paths through this zone—the height and length of their trajectory—are partly self-determined by their ability to adopt cognitive enrichment behaviors, both early and late in life, that optimize their potential for performing at the top end of their personal range for as long as possible.

In focusing on adults' agency in determining this trajectory from maturity through old age, research on cognitive reserve recognizes the role of contextual variables, but doesn't address the complex interrelations of genetic, biological, social, and experiential factors that encourage, facilitate, limit, or inhibit individuals' ability and desire to practice enrichment behaviors. I've touched on some of those factors that enhanced or diminished Virginia's resilience (e.g., level of nutrition, emotional stress, illness, social support) in old age, but this doesn't account for the advantages accumulated over the life course that helped her age gracefully, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

This theoretical model of cognitive reserve and the research that supports it seemed to validate as well as explain my own empirical findings and judgments about my mother's aging literacy, even in the details. For example, research confirms the negative impact on brain structure and function of the kinds of stresses I documented (Herzog, Kramer, Wilson, and Lindenberger 7). Cognitive enrichment theory supports my inference that increased physical activity and better nutrition (facilitated by a caregiver) enabled my mother's mini-bounce-back at age ninety-seven (see figure 4). The steepness of my mother's decline after its late onset, precipitated by an "increasing cascade of loss," characterizes individuals with high cognitive reserve (Herzog, Kramer, Wilson, and Lindenberger 8) My uncertainty about distinguishing dementia from "normal" cognitive aging is justified by Herzog and his colleagues' decision to place dementia and age-based cognitive aging on a continuum of cognitive impairment, treating their differences as primarily quantitative (10). Even my highly personal choice of "resilience" to name the pattern of my mother's aging resonates with how scientists use this term (more narrowly) to refer to how people effectively adapt to or resist the effects of aging and brain disease (Stern and Reserve, Resilience and Protective Factors PIA Empirical Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks Workgroup 1306).

While I was fascinated—and gratified—by the way this model illuminated and reinforced my findings, that was not what mattered to my "sense of an ending." The difference it made was to recast dualistic relations that run through this essay, rebalancing and integrating them into something more like a double dialectic. As originally written, I interpreted one of these dualities as a progression: my

laser focus on my mother's unique history as an individual gave way to a powerful awareness of her commonalities with others in suffering the limitations and losses of old age ("age as a leveler" that washes out differences). As I wrote then, "Life, or the activity of a self-organizing being, is about creating order in the face of entropy, but the limits of resilience lie in mortality itself, especially as the individual tries to integrate growing life wisdom across time scales from autobiography to culture and history."

Herzog and his colleagues did reinforce this perception, showing how Virginia's highly specific, apparently idiosyncratic experiences fit into larger patterns of aging that set ultimate boundaries for lifespan development. As they remark, "even individuals who engage in optimal enrichment behaviors will probably experience adverse cognitive changes at some point in the end-game of life" (Herzog, Kramer, Wilson, and Lindenberger 49). As these worsen, the individual reaches a threshold of dysfunction at which "goal-directed cognition in the ecology will be compromised" (Herzog, Kramer, Wilson, and Lindenberger 5).

But Herzog and his colleagues give equal weight to individuals' uniqueness from an ecological perspective: "Each of us develops and grows older in our own unique niche, which we co-create with nature and the physical and social environment" (5). Within boundaries that limit potential, they emphasize how much of a person's resilience is self-created: their "core argument is that the life course of the individual is forged from experience and choice" (7). If, as scientists tell us, engagement in physical activity and cognitive stimulation build cognitive reserve (the earlier in life the better, but still developmentally possible in old age), then my mother shaped her own trajectory by her choices from a young age. Although no athlete, Virginia took many physically challenging trips in yearly travel from her fifties to her mid-seventies and maintained heart health to the end of her life. Her lively, wide-ranging intellectual curiosity was manifest in habitual daily reading from childhood through old age, simultaneously reading multiple books plus daily newspapers and journals. While she developed deep knowledge of many subjects and authors, she remained the consummate generalist, always open to new topics and areas of learning. In other words, she engaged in the primary behaviors said to build cognitive reserve and support resilience.

"When I deliberately chose in this essay to make the forces of decline the figure against the ground of Virginia's late composing, it inevitably took on an elegiac tone, mourning what was lost. But what I feel now more vividly—at the end of her life, as I end this essay— is pride and pleasure in the stubborn longevity of her literacy."

Christopher Herzog, Arthur F. Kramer, Robert S. Wilson, and Ulman Lindenberger's framework, and the research I read about cognitive reserve, made it possible to reconcile competing perspectives of my mother as a unique individual, with a distinctive historical "becoming," and a person participating in common cultural experiences and universal patterns of aging, whose inability to complete an end-of-life project is an expression of our shared mortality. I experience them now more

like simultaneous gestalts I can shift fluidly between, in the phenomenological process of "varying" perceptions. (And I understand there will be many more gestalts, as placing my mother's life course in time, history, and culture fills in the spaces between the two extremes of uniqueness and universal humanity.)

This intellectual shift has its parallel in an affective one, rebalancing what I described earlier as the positive and negative aspects of aging literacy. When I deliberately chose in this essay to make the forces of decline the figure against the ground of Virginia's late composing, it inevitably took on an elegiac tone, mourning what was lost. But what I feel now more vividly—at the end of her life, as I end this essay—is pride and pleasure in the stubborn longevity of her literacy. I can celebrate how far her resilience carried her: how long she sustained her composing effort, in the face of so many obstacles; how much she accomplished in a composing task that was by definition unending, since she never stopped learning: there was always more to add, to update, to integrate. In the words of Florida Scott-Maxwell, "We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high. If it is a long defeat, it is also a victory, meaningful for the initiates of time, if not for those who have come less far" (1).

NOTES

ⁱ We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to the texts cited here. For Bazerman, "Taking": Charles Bazerman, Steve Graham, Arthur N. Applebee, Paul Kei Matsuda, Virginia W. Berninger, Sandra Murphy, Deborah Brandt, Deborah Wells Row, and Mary Schleppegrell. For Bazerman, *Lifespan*: Charles Bazerman, Arthur N. Applebee, Virginia W. Berninger, Deborah Brandt, Steve Graham, Jill V. Jeffery, Paul Kei Matsuda, Sandra Murphy, Deborah Wells Rowe, Mary Schleppegrell, and Kristen Campbell Wilcox. It is *LiCS′* editorial policy to name all authors of a text in cases where "et al" is used. We do this because "et al." can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.

ⁱⁱ We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to this text: Tania Zittoun, Jaan Valsiner, Vedeler Dankeert, João Salgado, Miguel M. Gonçalves, and Dieter Ferring. It is *LiCS′* editorial policy to name all authors of a text in cases where "et al" is used. We do this because "et al." can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.

[1] See Per Linell for a definition of dialogism that captures the worldview implied in calling my memoir "dialogic." He describes dialogism as other-oriented, viewing human beings as ineluctably interdependent: methodologically this means that "*relational wholes* and interactions are the basic ontological primitives and analytical primes" to be studied (15). Among the concepts he attributes to dialogic thinking are interactivity, contextuality, and semiotic mediation (13–14). See section VI on ecological theories, which by this definition are dialogic.

[2] In an archive created for my project by librarian Lindsey Hutchison, unpublished writings by Virginia LaRochelle Wetherbee include a book-length memoir, a collection of stories about the family, and numerous essays. She published a humorous account of our family life in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1951 ("Too Many Chiefs and No Indians") and two essays in *The American Scholar*: "Life with Father, Life with Socrates" in 1982 and "The Golden Age of Eccentricity" in 1983. Since most of her unpublished writings are undated, part of my ongoing research for the memoir is constructing as accurate a timeline for them as possible.

[3] Virginia's copies of the unfinished essay with her annotations have several variations on the title, including "Parenting," "The Parenting Game: Mission Impossible," and "The Parenting Game: Twenty Questions." In making decisions about reconstructing the essay from multiple annotated drafts (undated), I chose *The Parenting Game: Twenty Questions* as her favored title, but here I refer to it simply as *Parenting*. I won't be citing page numbers, since I am still reconciling the various versions.

[4] The companion essay to this one (in progress) addresses my questions about Virginia's motive,

purpose, and meaning. It was previewed in a talk (Louise Wetherbee Phelps, "Slow Composing in Old Age: Reconstructing Purpose and Process for an Unfinished Essay") at the Lifespan Writing Conference, July 2021.

[5] I chose the term "bouncing back" in part because it had deep meaning for my mother, who studied the POW experience in her unfinished essay (see Geoffrey Norman). Despite or perhaps because of its original extreme context (human beings pressed beyond their capacity to endure), it has become commonly used to define resilience (Steven M. Southwick and Dennis S. Charney 8), including responses to illness and old age (Richard Wanlass)..

[6] This phrase is quoted by my mother from Louise K. Kaplan (19), writing about Margaret Mahler's theories. The context in Virginia's unfinished essay is a set of questions she poses as prerequisite to decisions about parenting: "What is human nature? The nature of the child? 'The process that begins the shaping of a human being?'" (Virginia Wetherbee, Parenting). Virginia's starting point was her own experience as a child of the 1920s and '30s and as a young mother in the 1940s. As described in her memoir, The Rosetta Stone, her motherless upbringing by an eccentric father and multiple surrogates was far from traditional. When she became a mother herself, she was questioning, with her husband, how best to raise their children in a different era, in relation to the broader socialization of children through education and cultural influences.

[7] The phrase "good enough mother" references the work of Donald Winnicott (which Virginia first read in the 1950s) on a facilitating environment for a child's development.

[8] Classifying and contrasting "losses" with "gains" here oversimplifies late-life development and aging, because of the fact that events, conditions, neural changes, etc. have multiple effects, sometimes conflicting or contradictory, very often mixed; and judging what is negative or positive (or where it falls on a spectrum) depends on one's criteria. I'm judging impact on her literacy system as support for her composing, but that criterion can conflict with other needs and values of the whole person, like companionship or physical care.

[9] Graphs for this essay were designed with Derek Mueller, with additional assistance from my son Lon Wetherbee Phelps.

[10] I'm mindful of the spirit of openness to diverse methodological traditions and theoretical orientations that characterizes the emergent multidisciplinary community of lifespan writing research (the Collaboration). Its stance is "methodologically expansive," "resists regimentation," welcomes radical innovation in modes of inquiry, and seeks coherence through points of convergence (Ryan Dippre and Talinn Phillips, "Generating" 6-9).

[11] Ruth E. Ray's list of features of passionate scholarship includes, among other things, these genre qualities: "demonstrative of personal and experiential knowing, in conjunction with intellectual knowing"; "reflective and reflexive"; "emotionally engaged, rather than emotionally indifferent"; "reflect[ing] the distinct voice of the writer/scholar, while acknowledging the voices and viewpoints of others" (Endnotes 2). Its ideal outcome is not only intellectual understanding, but a different kind of knowing for both writer and readers about suffering, illness, aging (others' and our own), which evokes responses rooted in empathy and compassion.

[12] There is widespread belief, and fear, that dementia is inevitable in old age. Prevalence of

dementia does grow with age; a 2007 study in the US estimated it rises from 5% among those age 71–79 to 37.4 % among those 90 or older (Brenda L. Plassman, Kenneth M. Langa, Gwenith G. Fisher, Steven G. Heeringa, David R. Weir, Mary Beth Ofstedal, James R. Burke, Michael D. Hurd, Guy G. Potter, Willard L. Rodgers, David C. Steffens, Robert J. Willis, and Robert B. Wallace). However, the patterns vary widely among groups, including lower risk for those with college education, and dementia rates have been dropping in the US since 2000 (Kenneth M. Langa, Kenneth. M., Eric B. Lawson, Eileen M. Crimmons, Jessica D. Faul, Deborah A. Levine, Mohammed U. Kabeto, and David R. Weir).

[13] A friend of my mother's embroidered this saying, which Virginia attributed to her father. Like her, I've had it hanging near my desk since she passed it onto me.

[14] For a brief overview, see "Dementia." For critiques, see Stuart F. Spicker; Tom Kitwood; Karen A. Lyman. For current views and syntheses, see responses in Kitwood; Angela Gutchess; Anthea Innes; Innes, Fiona Kelly, and Louise McCabe; Steven R. Sabat. Although I discarded it as an explanation for my mother's inability to complete her composing project, my inquiry into dementia made a valuable contribution to my "personal and experiential knowing" of how ageism shapes attitudes toward cognitive decline and how family, caregivers, and the medical community can better understand, communicate with, and respond to elders experiencing it.

[15] Some of these scholars (Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer) analyze a writing program as part of the university as a complex social ecosystem; others (Mary Jo Reiff, Anis Bawarshi, Michelle Ballif, and Christian Weisser) describe writing programs as themselves complex systems, "discursive and material ecologies" (4).

[16] These theories have evolved from early work by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) into what became his PPCT model in the 1990s (Bronfenbrenner and Morris) to today's complex synthesis of multidisciplinary studies in developmental science (Anthony Steven Dick and Ulrich Muller; Richard M. Lerner, Concepts; Willis F. Overton and Peter C. M. Molenaar). Life course studies, pioneered by Elder, represent a parallel and intersecting tradition. See also Deborah Brandt, "Accumulating," on how literacies from different periods and generations overlap and intersect in any person's experience of the lifecycle. Today, the comprehensively ecological stance toward development, which regards every individual and her developmental trajectory as a unique nexus of forces at different scales, requires input and collaboration among multiple fields. As Sven E. Jörgensen says, "complex systems need a complex of theories to expose all their many facets" (xix, qtd. in Sidney I. Dobrin, "Ecology and" 8).

[17] Bronfenbrenner's categories of micro, meso, and macro time scales are widely known and useful, but to explain time scales more comprehensively, other scholars offer more nuanced taxonomies from neural and biological to cultural-historical to cosmic (Paul Thibault; Jay L. Lemke; Barbara Adam). See also Anna Smith and Paul Prior (2) on how, in Lemke's words, "moments add up to lives" (273) in chronotopically dispersed trajectories of semiotic becoming.

[18] Accounting for broader social and cultural events and forces as they affected Virginia's literacy life is beyond the scope of this essay, but I should note that the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 (9/11) had profound impact on her because of our family's links to the military and the intelligence community.

[19] In June 2014 an intelligent and compassionate Ethiopian woman began to cover most of a 24-hour care schedule. She was a perfect match for my mother (who had visited Ethiopia), and her attentive care improved Virginia's nutrition and exercise. This, along with her companionship, lifted Virginia's spirits and her cognitive capabilities, with a small but noticeable bounce-back in her literacy activities.

[20] The relational life stages pictured in the entropy diagram, attributed to Dr. Mark Frankel, are described by Louise Aronson: "independence or self-sufficiency, interdependence (when occasional help is needed), dependence (when a person needs regular, daily life help), crisis (when professional care may be required), and death" (193).

[21] My definition of composing and my observations of slow composing differ sharply from current concepts and process models and point to radically different methods for reconceptualizing composing through material and phenomenological reconstructions of composing over time. I will develop these ideas in future work.

[22] In her presentation Quinn Kennedy, a researcher and consultant on cognitive aging, interpreted Yaakov Stern's graph (figure 8) through a fictional illustration of how cognitive reserve might affect two women's experiences of cognitive decline over the last 15 years of their lives. In figure 8, the horizontal dotted line (score at incident AD visit) refers to the moment when performance on a memory test begins to decline noticeably.

[23] Daniel Holman and Alan Walker's effort to synthesize intersectional research with lifespan studies to explain unequal aging shows the great complexity of intersectionality among social categories and structural positions when considered from a lifespan developmental perspective, in part because these identities and positions change dynamically over a lifetime as individuals move through life transitions. Most people experience a mix of advantage and disadvantage in terms of axes of inequality (242). O'Rand's concept of accumulating multiple forms of "capital" over a lifetime offers one possibility for connecting broad patterns of intersectional advantages and disadvantages to an individual's life course and aging. See also George E. Vaillant on conclusions about aging well from Harvard University's longitudinal Study of Adult Development.

[24] Although studies of reading as it affects cognitive aging are limited, for some evidence it enhances cognitive reserve, especially if constant reading goes back to childhood, see Carol Chan; Daniel Eriksson Sörman, Jessica Körning Ljungberg, and Michael Rönnlund; for illustrative cases, see Rebecca William Mlynarczyk.

[25] See David Epstein on the longterm advantages of generalism over specialization.

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At the "Ends of Kinship":
Women Re(kin)figuring Literacy Practices
in Protracted Displacement

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KEYWORDS

transnational literacy; family literacy; language learning; migration; diaspora; older learners

Hāmi cinnu bhayo, bolnu bhayo, hāsnu bhayo. Maya sanga bhayo. We recognized [each other], spoke, and laughed. It happened with love.
> —Kausila, personal interview, Nepal, January 2013

As with rope or thread, some relationships fray through migration while others are newly knotted. The **ends of kinship** are ties that bind people to one another in dialogue with the emotional and structural forces that can sever or reformulate these bonds [my emphasis].
> —Sienna Craig, *The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives between Nepal and New York*, 11

INTRODUCTION

"It's not good," Kausila says to me in Nepali one day while I am going through a box of her old photos and documents. Kausila's English teacher, Manju, a young woman from the camps, nods sympathetically. We're seated together on Kausila's quilt-covered cot. Family pictures and old identification cards strewn about. We've just come from Kausila's morning English classes and the heat and mugginess of midday begins to creep up all around us, leaving a warm and damp film on the objects that we pass back and forth.

Kausila has invited me and Manju into her home, a makeshift bamboo hut with thatched roof and a polished, mud floor, to discuss her resettlement case and family history in more detail. Kausila has been living, here, in the Beldangi I Bhutanese Refugee Camp in Jhapa, Nepal, for close to two decades. Her resettlement application to be reunited with her daughter in Australia is pending the resolution of a difficult family situation that has led to Kausila's case file being separated from her daughter's.

"Anyway, it's a sad thing," she continues, "That is why I am trying to go there [to Australia]. I tried not going there, but finally I wondered, what would I do here? Sometimes I think that . . . where should I go from here? I think to myself, [about] leaving Bhutan, why [did] we have to leave? Maybe it would be better if I died. But what to do? My daughter is gone. She says it's nice and good [in Australia]. It is good.

And if she says it is good, it will be good for me as well."

"I miss her," Kausila trails off deep in thought.

"Anyway," she continues. "She is gone alone . . . . No one is gone [to Australia] from my parents' side. All others have gone to America. My daughter has gone to Australia, and she is the only one from my own house [to go there]. We are here, but ours [our resettlement process] is also going on. Let's see when we will go."

Amidst a decades-long displacement and massive refugee resettlement process, women from Bhutan, who were living in refugee camps in Nepal, sat down to speak with me in their common language, Nepali, about learning to read and write in English for resettlement. In these conversations, we discussed the interconnections among their desire to learn English and their complex experiences of literacy denial and forced migration. Often our conversations would meander, picking up and pulling at threads related to family separation and relocation, the protracted displacement, and uncertainty about the future. Across hundreds of interviews with women living in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, I heard stories like Kausila's, stories intimating both the limits and potentials of relational belonging forged in and through the circuitous, often overlapping, routes of both chosen and forced migrations, and the educational trajectories that could both "sever and reformulate these bonds" (Craig 11).

When I first met Kausila in the spring of 2013, she was 50 years old and had spent nearly half of her adult life in the Bhutanese refugee camps. Early in our conversations, Kausila talked about how her husband had abandoned her after they came to Nepal. She spoke about how her children had grown up in the camps and were now tending to families of their own. Alone in the camps at the time of our meeting, and painfully aware of each passing day, Kausila longed to be reunited with her resettled adult daughter in Australia, but she was unsure if that would be possible due to a complication with her application for resettlement. In the meantime, she attended English classes at a community-run language center in her camp sector. There she gathered with other women close in age, many with very limited experience of formal schooling, most unable to read or write in any language. Together they recited the English alphabet, memorized dialogues, and took to practicing writing their names in a language that was not their own. Beyond learning English for resettlement, women came to the language centers to share their stories, speak, and laugh with one another, or as Kausila describes in the first epigraph, "*cinnu*"—to recognize [each other], to become familiar. According to Kausila, at the language centers, women gathered not just to learn English but also to come to know each other through their shared affection, to hold each other in high esteem across differences in caste, ethnicity, and education. As Kausila says, "*Maya sanga bhayo*." It happened with love. Yet, the ties that bind women like Kausila in friendship and *maya* emerge from relational ties that have become stretched to their limit by the forces of global movements. In this way, the ties that bind are the very ends of kinship, wherein "[as] with rope or thread, some relationships fray through migration while others are newly knotted" (Craig 11).

This article explores women's language and literacy learning in the context of transnational

migrations and what Sierra Craig, an ethnographer with deep commitments to the study of Nepali migrations, calls "the ends of kinship." It is based on a participatory ethnographic study of transnational literacy practices undertaken during Bhutanese refugee resettlement from 2007 to roughly 2018. For this article, I draw from a time during that process, from August 2012 to late June 2013, when, as a research affiliate of Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme, I collaborated with local teachers and learners in conducting a series of interviews, focus groups, and community-led workshops in four language centers located throughout the Bhutanese refugee camps to gather information about women's investments in language and literacy learning for resettlement. Stories and dialogues like Kausila's, as well as other forms of expression, including ritual performances and ceremonies involving singing and dancing, would repeatedly pull my focus to questions of kinship and friendship in relation to women's learning. It was in this context, "at the ends of kinship," that women came together around their various, dynamic investments in learning to (re)negotiate the "ties that bind" (11). This article explores this (re)negotiation and how through conversations, stories, singing, and dancing, the women of the language centers came together in kindred solidarity around their learning and in dialogue with the forces of transnational migration.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEARNING AT "THE ENDS OF KINSHIP"

The main part of this study took place from 2012–2013 at the mid-point of a vast local-global effort to resettle over one hundred thousand people displaced from Bhutan. I conducted the study in collaboration with Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme's efforts to highlight the stories of women learners and teachers in the camp's language centers. As part of our collaboration, I taught demo lessons in the language centers, attended and participated in teacher-led planning meetings and trainings, developed interview protocols with local teachers, and presented reports and brief talks on the status of my research to program coordinators, local staff, and learners.

During this time, I learned from collaborators about the history of the language centers' investments in language and literacy education tied to resettlement and the ways in which the centers convened women who were not only interested in learning English but also actively negotiating the effects of resettlement in their daily lives. While investments in women's literacy and adult education had ebbed and flowed for the length of the protracted displacement, an increased focus on "eradicating illiteracy" emerged locally and in concert with international non-governmental organizations' (INGOs) agendas in response to resettlement processes (Perekkatt). In 2007–2008, grassroots efforts backed by INGO donor and implementing agencies led to the opening of multiple language centers along the outskirts of the seven Bhutanese refugee camps (Beldangi I, II, and Beldangi Extension, Sanischare, Goldhap, Khundunabari, and Timai). Then, just as suddenly, many of the language centers closed during resettlement, as the dismantling and merging of camp sectors commenced with the rapid emigration of the camps' temporary residents to third-party countries of resettlement. As hundreds of people were leaving the camp on a weekly basis for uncertain futures on the other side of the resettlement process, the women who attended English classes at the language centers

were feeling acutely the effects of being separated from family and friends. As these women waited for their own cases to make their way through a monolithic and labyrinthine system of external review and approval, they began to reimagine and reconstruct relational belonging in the interim, forming family of the neighbors and friends left behind, while also learning how to be in new forms of relationship with the immediate family members that had already departed the camps. For many of these women, the language centers functioned as a home away from home, a place they could go to be in community with other women who were also experiencing the effects of the resettlement's relocations, separations, and indefinite periods of waiting for cases to move forward.

During the earliest stages of my collaboration with these women and their teachers, nearly twenty thousand people remained in the camp awaiting either voluntary resettlement or integration of some sort. The people in the camp represented a rich diversity of language and culture backgrounds, including identification with various caste, indigenous, and ethnolinguistic groups. Just a cursory glance through the attendance logs of the language centers revealed that a majority of adult learners from 2010 onwards were among the indigenous, ethnic tribal groups native to Nepal who had migrated to Bhutan from Nepal, India, and Sikkim as agrarian laborers: Tamang, Rai, Gurung, and Magar (see Mabuhang, "Re/Visiting," for a critical overview of indigenous peoples of Nepal). That these groups were among the last to be resettled and among the most likely to experience delays and complications in their resettlement process is worthy of pause. Indeed, most of the women that I interviewed between 2012–2013 were among these groups and were negotiating complicated, stalled, or altogether absent resettlement cases. Many women from the language centers felt that those groups with historically more access to formal education, including highly literate Brahman-Chhetri, were the first to be resettled, while those from groups with historically less access to formal education, including non-literate people, older adults, and indigenous Nepalis, were the last to be resettled. Older adults of all backgrounds, who held political commitments to repatriation, were especially slow to engage with the resettlement process. Many older adults among the first generation of camp residents were skeptical of resettlement on the political and cultural grounds that relocation to third party countries was part of Bhutan's plan to permanently revoke refugee ties to the country through repatriation or citizenship claims ("Last Hope"). Generational and education differences as well as gender, caste, and ethnicity contoured people's experiences of navigating the resettlement process.

Unlike a generation of women born into camp life, the women who attended English classes at the language centers grew up in the rural, southern lowlands of Bhutan's swampy forests as agrarian laborers. Many women self-identified as either a *khetālo* (farm laborer) or a *gothālo* (herder). Lack of proximity to formal schools, as well as gendered practices related to domestic work, agrarian life, and family roles, limited women's access to primary education. Most women attending classes at the language centers had never been to school and could not read or write in any language. Despite this uneven access to literate resources compared with younger generations of women living in the camps, the women who came to learn at the language centers often committed themselves to months or years of learning during the resettlement period. At the height of the resettlement process, the language centers offered English classes six hours a day, five days a week in four-month batches to thousands of women. All classes were led by younger adults, mostly women in their twenties, who

grew up in the context of displacement and had completed secondary, English-medium education in camp schools. The women who gathered at the centers attended classes daily and learned to recite the English alphabet, memorize simple greetings and dialogues, and amass a new vocabulary for everyday items.

Beyond developing basic oral and literacy skills in English, the centers functioned as a respite for many older women beyond their childrearing days who were managing other difficult transitions at home. The vast majority of learners were middle-aged women or older, women in their late forties, fifties, and sixties, who were considered by their communities to be beyond the age of formal schooling, but whose movements were not restricted by pregnancy, breastfeeding, or raising young children. Compared with their younger counterparts born into camp life, these women were managing different sets of constraints related to learning, including having to negotiate both the effects of biological aging as well as shifting structures of responsibility within the family unit, as family separation through the resettlement process often propelled older adult women into roles as the head of a divided household. A home away from home for many women experiencing the fracturing of family units and shifting of familial responsibilities that came with resettlement's upending of camp life, the language centers provided a source of daily connection for a generational cohort of women caught between generational experiences of displacement, not young enough to have been born in the camps but also not old enough to be considered "too old" to work once resettled. In this space between generational polarities, women gathered in the language centers to navigate together the intersections of their experience and learning.

This context lays the groundwork for the conceptual discussion and key terms that follow in which I draw from theories and frameworks of experiential and negotiated kinship, together with intergenerational literacy perspectives in composition studies and education, to be in dialogue with how the women of this study creatively and performatively engaged in emergent forms of kindred solidarity through their learning. While certain kinship framings can lead to systems of classification that support "biological or heteronormative affinal underpinnings of relatedness" (Goldfarb and Schuster 2), new conceptualizations of kinship yield richly grounded studies of relational ties within specific cultural contexts as discursively and materially constructed and as contingent upon dynamics of power. These studies explore the social, material, and experiential meaning of such ties for individuals, families, and communities. Kinship continues to be, as Craig has noted, a necessary construct for thinking about relationality as "negotiated" and "experiential" (256; see also Carsten "Cultures," *After Kinship*). Indeed, vast bodies of work among Western and Nepali-centric scholars alike support this view (e.g. Bennett; Levine; Uprety, Pokharel, and Dhakal; Joshi). In what follows, I review the relevant literature, bringing together research into transnational literacy in composition studies, intergenerational and family literacy in education, and Nepali kinship studies before turning to a conversation among women living in the camps who were also attending language center classes at the time of my research. I then consider the ways these women *kin*-script and (*kin*)figure their own ideas about and practices of literacy in relation to kin and friends as these relational ties stretch, contract, and become transformed throughout a protracted displacement and ongoing resettlement process.

KINSCRIPTING TRANSNATIONAL LITERACY

In composition studies, research on literacies in transit across nation-states, regions, local communities, and households has contributed to discipline-specific ways of conceptualizing reading and writing as a resource for personal achievement, including economic and educational advancement, and for creating and sustaining trans-local connections and communities. Recent conceptualizations of literacy and mobility in writing studies, for example, link situated, textual practices of reading and writing to cross-border relations that both promote and inhibit certain kinds of mobility, predominantly upward, economic mobility fueled by formal education (e.g. Lorimer Leonard, Vieira, Young; Vieira *American*, *Writing*; Lorimer-Leonard "Traveling," *Writing*; Simon). Additional studies of literacy and migration that inform composition research limn local literacy practices in migrant families and communities in order to illustrate how situated literacies facilitate movements and networks across international borders (e.g. Farr; Warriner "Multiple Literacies," "Transnational Literacies"; Ek; Machado-Casas; Lam and Warriner; Moore), contribute to immigrant livelihoods and family intimacies (e.g. González; Fürstenau; de la Piedra; Kwon; Vieira *Writing*), and are involved in creating and sustaining transnational community (Pandey; Pahl).

Research on transnational literacy in composition studies has tended to draw on socio-cultural and political theories of transnationalism as a construct that helps to describe the mobility of literacy in terms of relationships and connections across national spaces in the context of an emerging global economy. Within the context of transnational migration, literacies, including family and community literacies, are considered by many compositionists to be mobile, migrant resources for achieving personal goals, connecting family members, and building alliances within an economy of literacy tied to the accumulation and amalgamation of language skills, practices, and values. Yet, as Iswari P. Pandey discusses in *South Asians in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacy*, it is "tricky" to talk about how literacy moves, what he calls "literacies in motion" or the "migrantness of literacies," because of the autonomous and decontextualized view of literacy skills associated with progress and colonialism (22). A concept of literacy as sets of practices in motion, too, is limited, argues Pandey, in that it fails to consider the ways in which literate activity is involved in creating, maintaining, mediating, and negotiating social relations in and across local and translocal contexts (25-6). More recent studies consider as well diasporic framings of mobility that contribute to questions of (de)territorialization, displacement, and relocation in relationship to migrant investments in literacy as acts of border-crossings. Kaia Simon, for example, has argued recently in *Literacy in Composition Studies* that resettlement processes enable people to make sense of new forms of literate action in new contexts of cross-boundary relations (3).

Similarly, I am interested in the ways women in the context of an ongoing protracted displacement and refugee resettlement process navigate mutable forms of relational belonging across their differences and in relation to their literacy investments. However, rather than draw from women's lived experiences of transnational migration and relational belonging to argue for literacy as a resource, I am interested in how women's stories of experience and cultural practices of learning help them to negotiate competing literate values and also re-story, or re-script, forms of relational

belonging in the context of their literacy practice. In speaking with women like Kausila at the language centers, I found that many women engage in critical negotiations around how and why literacy matters by evoking kin-full and kindred relationships that have shaped their access to and investments in education over the course of adult lives unfolding within a protracted displacement. The ongoing relational dynamics that Kausila evokes in her conversations with me, and others, seem to suggest motivations and investments in learning that extend beyond the achievement of personal goals, to the creation of new forms of relationality that serve both individual and collective purposes at a particular moment in time. Women's temporally defined experience of kin-full and kindred relations in the context of their transnational mobility mediates the collective, community context of learning as well as women's individual investments in literacy.

To better understand how kin-full and kindred relationships contour women's storied experiences of literacy learning throughout the life course, I turn to literacy studies in education fields, and in particular anthropology and education. Core research in family and intergenerational literacies in these fields provide frameworks and conceptual terminology for thinking about how shifting dynamics of culturally specific forms of relational belonging over the life course of a family mediate the possibilities and constraints of individual family members' literacy learning. Vivian Gadsen's work, for example, which brings family life course studies in anthropology into conversation with intergenerational literacy research in education, has provided me with a way of understanding the relationship between literacy practices and women's shifting roles and responsibilities within a family structure over time. Citing Carol Stack and Linda Burton's

> *"The ongoing relational dynamics that Kausila evokes in her conversations with me, and others, seem to suggest motivations and investments in learning that extend beyond the achievement of personal goals, to the creation of new forms of relationality that serve both individual and collective purposes at a particular moment in time.""*

groundbreaking ethnographic work on family life course, Gadsen introduced the interlocking constructs of *kin*-scripts, *kin*-work, *kin*-time, and *kinscript*ion to studies of intergenerational literacy. Kin-scripts are family scripts, or patterns, that discursively and materially shape the structures of relationship within families, indexing complex interplays of beliefs, values, and cultural practices. Kin-scripts shape individual family member's access to and investment in various forms of social activity beyond the home, including literacy (Stack and Burton 160). Kin-work describes the various types of work that particular families need to accomplish in order to survive and how this work gets distributed, often unevenly, across family members according to sex, gender, and age (160). Kin-time refers to shifting roles and responsibilities within particular family structures over time (162). Kinscription is the negotiated process of assigning family obligations, or work, to individuals based, in part, on their scripted roles and responsibilities within a family structure (163). Putting family life course studies into dialogue with literacy studies in education research, as Gadsen does in her work on intergenerational and family literacy, helps to illuminate the relationship between literacy

practices and "how families as multigenerational collectives, and individuals embedded within them negotiate the life course" (Stack and Burton 157).

The intersections of family and transnational literacy learning in the context of the indigenous, inter-ethnic, inter-caste relations that make up the Bhutanese refugee diaspora is its own particularly complex, trans-local site of practice. Bhutanese refugees are not a homogenous group. Area studies scholars as a well as scholars of migration have pondered this question, wondering to what extent the mostly Nepali-speaking population of southern Bhutan should be considered ethnic Nepali. The question of the Nepali identity of the southern-living farmers forced out of Bhutan in the 1990s is a complex one. In *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*, one of the first scholarly monographs written by a Westerner on the history of the Bhutanese Diaspora, Michael Hutt cautions against projecting the relatively new category of Nepali ethnicity backward through time. Although a process of cultural and linguistic homogenization had been underway in Nepal during the mid-twentieth century, the varied peoples of Nepal, especially of Tibetan-Burman ethno-linguistic identities, still maintain their own distinct identities to some degree and assert them or play than down according to the political and economic circumstances (5). Regardless, there has developed a relatively homogenous, ethno-linguistic identity known as Nepali within which ethnic sub-categories have been subsumed (6). In a dissertation project on the literacy practices of recently resettled Bhutanese refugees in the US, Tika Lamsal also discusses the complex identity of Bhutanese refuges as diasporic migrants. Lamsal draws from participant accounts to complicate Bhutanese refugees' identifications in relation to the shifting contexts of their national belonging. Lamsal's participants unsettle a strong, singular ethnic or national identity, claiming neither a fully Bhutanese nor fully Nepali identity, and not yet able to claim citizenship in the US. Lamsal argues, "Being everywhere but belonging nowhere, the Bhutanese refugees are in search of an identity" (97).

Turning to kinship studies in the Nepali literature provides some helpful framing for thinking about the value of kinship among Bhutanese refugees with relational ties to Nepali cultural practices, language, and identity. More recent approaches to kinship studies in the Nepali-centric scholarship of cultural anthropology, for example, provide locally grounded, culturally inflected frameworks for conceptualizing and analyzing the ethnic diversity and multidimensionality of kin relations in Nepal. In Laya Prasad Uprety, Binod Pokharel, and Suresh Dhakal's edited collection, *Kinship Studies in Nepali Anthropology*, kin relations in Nepal are studied through a variety of new theoretical frameworks and grounded examples that push against the structural functionalism and unilineal descent systems of conventional approaches to kinship and culture. In Nepal, kin relations, whether through bloodlines (consanguine), marriage (affinal), or through ritualized bonds to non-relatives (*mit laune*), powerfully influence both society and language.

Linguistically, kinship terms contribute to the rich morphology of the Nepali language and are often used explicitly to express familial relationship as well as metaphorically to express non-kin relations. Kin terms are so significant to the structure of everyday interactions in Nepal that they are often used as a form of address that replaces an individual's given name (Singha, Sarma, and Purkayastha 49). This was the case in the refugee camps where learners at the language center were often referred to by their teachers as "aunties" and where I, as a fixed presence for almost a year, took

on the endearing though somewhat diminutive title of "*hāmro bahini*" (our little sister) in relation to learners and staff. Indeed, kinship terms were used to frame everyday interactions, maintaining an explicit structure of relationality among insiders, outsiders, and go-betweens.

In bringing together the above conceptual and theoretical constructs, my aim is to tie the study of transnational literacy in composition and education fields to the study of intergenerational, family life course, and kinship in anthropological fields. I do this in order to address limited theorization of dynamic, experiential, and negotiated forms of relational belonging among adult learners in protracted contexts of transnational migration, especially among older adults. As Lauren Marshall Bowen has noted in "Composing a Further Life," there remains a dearth of studies in the field of rhetoric and composition specifically geared toward the complexities and dynamics of older adult literacy learning across the lifespan and through the lens of intergenerational perspectives. Marshall's significant review of the literature of cross-generational perspectives on literacy in composition studies illustrates how previous studies tend to figure older adults as "literacy sponsors and mentors for younger generations, or as points on a timeline" that "[mark] historical shifts in literacy" without troubling the complex layering of identities and relationships involved in making those shifts (Bowen VIII).

Bowen's synthesis and critique of cross-generational perspectives in composition studies, as well as research spanning family relations and literacy learning in education fields, has helped me see how transnational literacy studies might be more attentive to shifting relations within the family collective over the lifespan of individual family members. Engaging these shifting family dynamics with consideration of the temporal contexts of specific migrations and protracted displacements could help transnational literacy researchers better account for the ways in which people's investments in literacy learning across the life span are influenced by how kindred relations are interdependent, experiential and re-negotiated over time and in particular circumstances. In addition, studies of transnational literacy learning might also consider the way community-based concepts and practices of kin-scripting and re(kin)scripting relations, within and beyond the family, influence people's sense of self and identity in relation to their literacy access across the life span; shape individual and generational investments in learning later in life; and contour shifting literacy practices throughout various stages of the life course. Thus, I would like to suggest that analyzing women's literacy practices in relationship to the way culturally inflected kin-scripts shift and change over the life course in transnational migration provides a more dynamic approach to migrant family literacy than a literacy-as-resource lens does alone, as it encapsulates the tensions and contradictions of everyday living in relation to others over time.

In the discussions below, I introduce three women among Kausila's peer group at the language centers, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya. Ranging in age from 52 to 68 years old, these women explore through their dialogue with each other the working frameworks of kinship, friendship, and belonging that shape their investments in learning at a time in their life when the future remains uncertain. More specifically, in the first discussion, women share their generational perspectives on kinship, literacy access, and their changing roles within family during protracted displacement. Drawing on the terms of kin-scripts, kin-work, and kin-time from family studies and intergenerational literacy

research, I explore the role of women's shifting relational ties and responsibilities in relation to their language and literacy investments. In the second discussion, I explore the theme of friendship as it emerges across group interviews and a performance of learning and discuss how women at the language centers draw on their connections with each other to reformulate kindred ties and in the process re(kin)figure and re(kin)script their literacy practice.

Gāi Bastu Jhundaera Ani Jānu Just Hang Up the Cows and Go!: Kinscripts and Access to Literacy Education Before Resettlement

Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita sit side by side on the instructors' work bench in the Sanischare Camp language center office on a warm day in early summer. Just behind them along the back wall of the office hangs a chalkboard, beautifully decorated with a hand drawn border of dahlias, featuring the center's attendance tallies. The day's attendance totals remain stable compared to previous weeks at around 200 learners. Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita have come from their morning classes to talk with me about their experiences with schooling before displacement as well as their goals for learning during resettlement. The teacher who recommended them for the interview, 24-year-old Muna, sits quietly and watchfully nearby. She is the lead facilitator and resident artist at the center and is responsible for the decorated chalkboard. Abi Maya, Suk Maya, and Susmita seem eager to talk and the mood is light. After some initial introductions, I begin with a series of questions I had developed earlier with Muna, who as a center facilitator was curious about what brought women to the center and how this information might be used for recruitment purposes.

"Did you go to school?" I ask Abi Maya in Nepali.

"I didn't get the chance," replies Abi Maya. "My parents gave me to another when we were young. It was also to another's husband. There was already a wife, *jethi māthi thiyo*. There was a sister above me [a first wife]. So, my parents gave me a *jethi māthi*.

"The time was not like now!" interrupts Suk Maya. "The time was very difficult. How was that time!"

"We got many problems," continued Abi Maya. "I gave birth to children and cared for them. And staying like that the agitation began. We were afraid at that time, being illiterate. Being illiterate without any sense, even the small person could frighten us. Without education, there was nothing inside our sense …. That is why we, the farmers, we used to go only to the market, but for the school, we didn't see. Though, my older brother used to read there. I didn't see the school where my brother used to go. Some studied, though. Some people led their children to study more. But for us, since from the young age, we were sent to work in the field to look after animals, cows, goats and to go for working outside. It was all very much. If I have to speak honestly, we didn't get a chance to enjoy or even take time while eating, also."

"In Bhutan, we women had all the work to do," interrupts Suk Maya. "We had to look after the baby and the cows. We also had to look after the buffalo, goats and sheep. Also, we had to do our own work and the work of our friends, as *kethālo* in the fields, but if I request the same thing here of my daughter-in-law, she will probably tell me, this old woman is going mad! We will be considered crazy

if we make a request like that! We used to do seven different types of work before we could go to sleep, but here, we just cook and eat. Eh! I used to do all the work."

"Being a daughter-in-law in Bhutan there were many duties, ma'am," Susmita says, addressing me, directly. "I would wake up early every morning to clean the drinking vessels until they shined. Then I would bring the water and prepare the tea and give it to father-in-law and mother-in-law. While the tea was getting ready, I would make sure my parents washed their faces. We used to have a pitcher of water that we kept ready on the floor, and I would make sure my mother and father-in-law washed their faces while the tea was getting ready. After that I carried the water vessels into their house. I prepared all the food and looked after the children. Sometimes, mother-in-law would help, but most of the time I had to do it myself.

"For us," says Susmita, "the school was very far. There was no system to send anyone to school. There was only to look after the cows and work in the field. That is what we used to do. There was no school. Only a few people's children used to go to school. Also, they used to say that girls should not be taught but only the boys, and my brothers were the only ones taught. There were two brothers and three sisters. My sisters are in Bhutan itself, and I am the only one to stay here. All others are there, and I am the only one stuck here."

"Education is important," says Susmita, "but what to do? *Buddhi aaudaina*! The sense doesn't come. It's time for us to die but I'm interested to learn!"

"English comes a little bit," Abi Maya says. "We understand only a little. But I'm afraid that reaching there we will not understand what they talk, and they will not understand what we talk."

"If we go there," Susmita nods, "it will be like *latang patang,* beating around the bush, to get them to understand. I asked a lady who was there, how are you working there? 'Eh!' she says, 'You study the language for some time,' and she told me, 'But I am still working and speaking with body language!' She is saying it's easier now, 'because many Nepalese are here.' She studied here in the language center and went there and was resettled three or four years ago. She was clever and studied here."

Susmita thinks about it and then says, "Automatically we will learn things there, even we uneducated people. If we don't know how to read, but know how to speak, and know a little something about the place, it will be OK. Now we are learning."

In a separate interview at Sanischare later that week, I speak with Suk Maya at her home a short, walkable distance from the language center.

"If father and mother had known at that time that life would be like this," says Suk Maya, "then they would have sent us to school, and it would be easy to read now. But they were only rich by money, not by education. Nothing else was there. If there was money, it was everything for them. They gave us one *tola* of gold and a pregnant cow to all the ten daughters as dowry. To all the ten daughters, they slaughtered pig and sheep, and they gave us extravagant weddings. For Brahmins, they gave sheep to eat. If some sister's cows died, they gave another one, double! One *tola* of gold and a cow with a baby. Two were given! Double, as the cows died! Though they were successful financially, they did not permit us to study. I had two brothers, they looked after us, but the educated one among the two is gone now, resettled. Only the deaf and dumb are left behind.

"Ma'am, a long time ago, my father and mother—though school was just over there—if we said,

I want to go to school, they would say, "*Gāi bastu jhundaera ani jānu*! Just hang up the cows and go! That father and mother were like *duplicates* of one another; they both said the same thing! Another father and mother I think I am getting now. The mother and father who gave birth to me were like duplicates, but the father and mother that I have got now [referring to teachers and staff at the center] are real ones, I think."

~

Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya's investments in learning, and especially literacy, are deeply influenced by what they felt to be the possibilities and constraints of learning after a certain, lived age, when responsibilities of managing family life were to take precedence over schooling. In this way, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya kin-script their various experiences of schooling and access to literacy education. Kin-scripts illuminate how one's individual life course is connected to others and how "scripted," or patterned, roles within family get negotiated through the family as a collective (Stack and Burton). Kin-scripts highlight the temporal as well as interdependent nature of the life course as individual's roles within family settings change over time and in relation to the dynamic movements of other family members (Stack and Burton; Elder 279). In the dialogues above, women describe similarly patterned experiences of being denied schooling at a young age because of their sex and because of gendered expectations of girls' roles within the family. This is not to say that all displaced women from Bhutan experienced these denials and gendered expectations, but that many women at the language centers discursively drew on these kin-scripts to express their historically layered and dynamic investments in learning.

The related concepts of kin-work and kin-time also play out in the examples above. As discussed previously, kin-work refers to the often age and gender-based distribution of labor within families that is needed for families to survive, while kin-time refers to the temporal and sequential ordering of family roles and responsibilities over the life course of a family. Suk Maya evokes through colorful language the gendered roles and responsibilities girls were expected to fulfill in their natal home – "*Gāi bastu jhundaera ani jānu*!" Just hang up the cows and go! In Suk Maya's telling of her early childhood experience of schooling, she portrays two immoveable parents who mock her pleas to be educated, and who, according to Suk Maya, think the very idea of girls leaving home to be educated is ridiculous and impractical. The family's survival depended on Suk Maya herding cattle, tending to livestock. Over time, and as adults living in the camps, women continued to manage the daily affairs of the household. Educational opportunities were few and far

> *"Reaching deep across indigenous, ethno-linguistic, caste, religion, and generational lines, women's performance of learning was evocative of both their shared experiences and non-mutuality, their differences. It contoured a collective practice of transnational literacy that had nothing to do with reading and writing in the conventional sense, but everything to do with re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring 'the ties that bind' through literacy practice."*

between. Now, at their age, in their middle years and getting older, women struggle to become fluent in the language of resettlement. Abi Maya says, "We understand only a little [English]." Cracking jokes and commiserating with one another, the women wonder if they will be "beating around the bush" to make themselves understood by others after they resettle. "Isn't it funny," Suk Maya wonders, "that now at the time of dying, I am interested to learn."

Even so, and while contending with the rapid social changes unfolding within an ongoing resettlement process, these women commit themselves to learning English by attending class, memorizing English-only dialogues, and reciting the ABCs. This commitment to learning begs the question: if women remained unconvinced of the possibility of becoming literate later in life, why did they invest so much time and energy in learning? One answer may be that women continued at the language centers, despite not making much progress in written language, not only out of a sense of responsibility to resettled family members or a sense that they would need English to survive, but out of the "love" that Kausila describes as coming about through acts of connection and togetherness involving speaking, laughing and getting to know each other's stories at the language centers. Below, I contend that the women of the language centers take up learning later in life at the edge of their impending resettlement not to become literate, but as a form of critical negotiation and solidarity at the ends of kinship. This form of critical negotiation and solidarity involved performances of learning that, rather than leading to fluency or proficiency in English, led to questioning, challenging, and intervening in "ties that bind people to one another in dialogue with the emotional and structural forces that can sever or reformulate these bonds" (Craig 11). Reaching deep across indigenous, ethno-linguistic, caste, religion, and generational lines, women's performance of learning was evocative of both their shared experiences and non-mutuality, their differences. It contoured a collective practice of transnational literacy that had nothing to do with reading and writing in the conventional sense, but everything to do with re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring "the ties that bind" through literacy practice.

Maya Sanga Bhayo   It Happened with Love: Recontextualizing Learning through Performances of Kinship And Friendship

Many women were skeptical of the promises of English and literacy. Rather than attend the language centers for the singular goal of learning to read and write in English for resettlement, women were also interested in creating community with other women across caste, indigenous, and ethnic group differences. Across interviews, women described the importance of center activities that went beyond learning English to meeting with friends, exchanging dialogue with each other, laughing, celebrating joys and sorrows, nurturing a shared affinity. Some women described it as *maya*, a kind of love or affection for each other, including 30-year-old Jannuka, who had been coming to the center for months while she waited on her medical examinations to clear for resettlement processing. When I ask Jannuka about what she hoped to gain from attending daily classes at her local center, Jannuka explains, "I know many friends here [at the center], and I am getting help from them. If I had stayed at my house, there will be tensions and feelings. But coming here? I meet friends and have friendships."

The women of the language centers evoked friendship repeatedly in private conversations with me and in dialogue with each other. In many ways the friendships formed in the language centers operated as metaphorical family, or fictive kin, for women who were experiencing physical separation from biological family members. Such relationships enabled new forms of kin-scripting literacy practice. A focus group centered on language and caste differences in the language centers, for example, highlighted for me the way women evoked new kindred relations in the context of their language center friendships. Sitting in a circle one afternoon in a Beldangi II language center classroom, I spoke in Nepali with 19 women about the effects of caste, ethnicity, and language differences on their relationship to English, literacy, and learning at the center. Going around the circle, we each introduced ourselves, and then I commented on the great diversity of the group.

"There are many different groups and family names represented here. There are Tamang, Magar, Limbu, Bishwa, Bhattatrai. Is there any 'tension' among you here?"

Parbati, a teacher-facilitator among the group, helped to translate my accented Nepali, "You are here from many castes. Do you have any tension or problems being together?" she asked.

"Not at all!" the group answered in unison. "[Tension] doesn't come here, miss!"

Then, one by one, women interjected:

"We are all friends!"

"If we cut ourselves, our blood will be the same!"

"Though we are different castes, our race is Nepali."

"Everyone's blood is the same. No one's blood is either thicker or thinner than anyone else's"

I interrupted the consensus to try to make a finer point about the differences in inter-caste tension and collaboration both inside and outside of the language center:

"But there is tension sometimes, outside of the language center, yes?" I asked.

"If we have tension outside," came a voice from across the room, "regarding anything, we will have no tension coming inside this center because, here, will be many friends, and we will enjoy. And, also, we'll forget our tension at home, after coming here. There will be no tension inside the language center. We are all friends here, and we gather and enjoy [each other].

Another woman agreed, "We carry the load of tensions, but we will feel we are light coming inside the center. We unload that load. We feel peace. If there is something in our mind, it will become cool. That is what we want to say. If we get a chance to talk and learn [together], we'll feel ourselves at peace and the grating tension in our mind will be gone. Tension runs away.

Other women continued to add to the conversation:

"I feel the same way. All the problems run away. We get a chance to study. I'll be able to greet friends and introduce myself. I know friends [here]."

"I feel the same."

~

Less than a month after this focus group was recorded, I sat in the Beldangi II language center for the last time before the leaving the camps in June 2013. The students and teachers had prepared a farewell ceremony for me that overlapped with the closing of another four-month batch of classes, complete with several hours of ceremonial *tika*, speeches, singing, dancing, and other performances

to mark the occasion. About mid-way through the ceremony, several women gathered in front of the crowd that had formed, and they began to sing and dance the *sangini*. They sang,

> *hāmro hāmro rakshā gara*
>
> *hāmi khelchum sangini*
>
> *hāmi khelchum sangini*
>
> /Protect us and our way of life and
>
> we will keep singing and dancing together as friends;
>
> we will keep singing and dancing together as friends.

Successive verses of the *sangini*, sung on that day, illustrate the metaphorical entanglement of women's knowledge, the sacred, and the power of friendship. The flower and pond imagery in the lyrics represented below are associated with feminine deities (Davis). The school and temple are mirrored reflections of sacred space.

> Īśwarakō *kinārma, phulāi phulyō*
>
> *Iswarāi ujyālo*
>
> *Eschoollāī ma, phulāi phulyō*
>
> *Eschoollāī ujyālo*
>
> *Ek thuga tipi ne mathāi*
>
> *Dui thuga eschoolmāi lagāula*
>
> /In God's pond, flowers bloomed.
>
> God is bright.
>
> In the school, flowers bloomed.
>
> The school is bright.
> Put one flower on the head for a blessing.
> Keep two in the school.
>
> Īśwarakō *kinārma, phulāi phulyō*
>
> *Iswarāi ujyālo*
>
> *Mandirlāī ma, phulāi phulyō*
>
> *Mandirlāī ujyālo*

Ek <u>thuga</u> tipine mathāi
Dui thuga mandiramāi lagāula

/In God's pond, flowers bloomed.

God is bright.

In the temple, flowers bloomed.

The temple is bright.
Put one flower on the head for a blessing.
Keep two in the temple.

Typically performed by high caste women during the Nepali *Tij* festival*,* the *sangini* is an intergenerational performance involving the return to the natal home of married away daughters. *Sangini* songs are often composed of dialogues among women at various points along the life course as they share stories of suffering and happiness through their singing and dancing (Subba; Chaudhuri, Lepcha, and Maiti). Yet, as a literacy event, this *sangini* was contextualized differently from the traditional performances typically associated with festive occasions and annual homecomings. Situated within a language center developed to support a language policy of expediency in response to a rapidly unfolding refugee resettlement process, this performance is tangled up in not only cataclysmic social change, but also in the gradual shifting of structures of responsibility within family and community that come with prolonged periods of indefinite waiting in protracted displacement. Women who were young mothers at the time of leaving Bhutan are grandmothers now. Family separations caused by complicated resettlements have left some women alone, desperate to be reunited with their loved ones through "the process," as others struggle with decisions about whether to leave Nepal at all.

As a performance of learning, this *sangini* signals not only these women's complex, and at times, contradictory investments in literacy for resettlement but also their dialogic participation with the larger "emotional and structural forces" of transnationalism that contour belonging (Craig 11). The women of the language centers sing and dance for the protection of their way of life while also invoking divine blessings for their learning and going to school, which were considered unusual practices for older women in the camps. Situated at "the ends of kinship," their performance shifts focus from learning English to the way resettlement stretches family relations across the globe, putting pressure on familiar structures of responsibility and shifting roles within the family over time, opening new possibilities for literate

> *"As a performance of learning, this sangini signals not only these women's complex, and at times, contradictory investments in literacy for resettlement but also their dialogic participation with the larger 'emotional and structural forces' of transnationalism that contour belonging (Craig 11)."*

subjectivities and practices. Just as the flowers in the school have bloomed, within the ends of kinship, women's friendships have also blossomed, illuminating other options and possibilities for literacy beyond the kin-scripted practices that women recount in their recollections of the denial of literacy in early childhood. In re-(kin)scripting and re-(kin)figuring literacy practice through their friendships at the language centers, women claim ownership over their learning in ways that support their ideas of wellbeing, including a reorganization of literacy practice away from the functional goal of learning English for resettlement toward literacy learning as a re(kin)scripting of the ties that bind.

SANGINI: RE(KIN)FIGURING TRANSNATIONAL LITERACY

Over the course of a decade, from roughly 2008–2017, or the length of the Bhutanese refugee resettlement process, thousands of women gathered for daily English classes at language centers scattered throughout the Bhutanese refugee camps. Nestled deep within the jungles of Jhapa and Morang districts in southeastern Nepal, across several language centers, women speak with me, their teachers, and each other about their conflicting desires related to learning. Often women point to the irony and contradiction of learning later in life, like when Susmita says, "Now at the time of dying, I am ready to learn!" Woven into their stories and experiences of learning at the language centers are other, more deeply sedimented experiences of literacy denial and opportunity. Women recall not being admitted to the rural schools that dotted the ridgelines and swampy marshes of Bhutan's southern hills and valleys. They speak of early marriages and motherhood taking priority over education, of weighing the promises and failures of short-lived literacy programs during their protracted displacement, of the relational ties that bind. Through their stories women evoke and perform relationship. They explore relational and community attitudes toward women's learning and call into question later-in-life literacy investments. In doing so, women evoke histories of literacy, examine kindred relations, and reformulate affective investments in ways that trouble and enrich what is meant by transnational literacy.

For example, rather than submit to resettlement's language and literacy imperatives that one must learn English in order to survive migration processes and become self-sufficient in the country of one's relocation, Susmita is rather skeptical of the benefits of literacy on the other side of the resettlement process. She wonders about the irony of learning after a certain age – what good is learning *at the time of dying?* – and considers whether learning English might just be *latang patang*, a big commotion over nothing. Suk Maya, too, weighs the limits and potentials of language and literacy learning as an older adult against her experience of being denied access to literacy education throughout her life, and Abi Maya is concerned that the little bit of learning they do in the language centers is not enough to become self-sufficient. Regardless, Susmita, Suk Maya, and Abi Maya attend English classes religiously. They are invested in the space of learning, sending word to their teachers and friends when they are not able to attend, and actively working to recruit their neighbors and peers to the center. In the language center, these women find community and a place to belong. For Suk Maya, her teachers and friends at the center are like her natural family, even more than her biological parents, who Suk May describes as *duplicates*, an English loan word that Suk Maya wielded

intentionally to critique what she perceives as her parent's duplication of the sexed and gendered norms that reinforced their decision not to educate her in the first place.

Suk Maya comes to the language center every day, along with Susmita and Abi Maya, but their investment in learning does not come without a critical sense of ambivalence about the whole endeavor. In this space of learning, women share stories of being denied access to literacy education in early life, and they weigh the possibilities and constraints of learning after a certain age. In talking with each other and with me, they share stories of experience that are in dialogue with conflicting sets of expectations and desires. They set their current literacy practices against the engendered and kin-scripted literacies of early childhood and contextualize their investments in their experience of ongoing migratory dispersals. They are critical of accumulating literacies, but also engaged in a re-storying of themselves as educated persons. As a navigational practice (a practice of navigating the complexities of resettlement), the goal of literacy is more than the accumulation of sets of skills needed to survive resettlement. Rather, literacy learning is an activity through which women might negotiate together their experiences of happiness and suffering related to migrations. Women use the resettlement imperative to become literate to create a space for solidarity that enables them to collectively make sense of their experience of the past, connect that experience to the present, and imagine a future that is not disconnected from that experience but is also not a reproduction of it. Women look to the past to reimagine and re(kin)script literate possibilities.

Furthermore, women's discursive and embodied construction of the value of friendship, including performances like the *sangini*, call into being a collective intervention in the kin-scripted literacies of the past. In effect, women re(kin)figure their literacy practice through kindred ties with one another that provide the affective, embodied, and imaginal means through which to navigate changing relationships and literate subjectivities. As a performance of possibilities, situated in the learning context of resettlement exigencies, the *sangini* interrupts conventional associations between transnational literacy learning and individual achievement or progress, by grounding literacy practice in the collectivity of women's singing and dancing together. As a song and dance of women friends typically performed at the time of marriage, the *sangini* evokes kindred ties in a reformulation and recontextualization of relational belonging *in the language center*s and in relationship to a communally organized adult learning program. It is through a re(kin)figuring of literacy practice involving "friends" that "bleed the same blood," that women learners at the language centers seek to create and sustain ties that bind them to each other across their differences in caste, home language, or *aaphno bhasa*, and religion and through these ties, navigate together, the possibilities and constraints of learning during a protracted displacement and ongoing resettlement process.

CONCLUSION

This article illustrates how women learners use the language and literacy imperatives of resettlement to create an effectual, kindred solidarity across their differences that transforms the outcomes of their learning from functional sets of language skills and resources for crossing borders to active negotiations of transnational "realities" within the ephemeral and liminal space of

a protracted displacement. The women I spoke with at the language centers were rightfully skeptical of literacy resources and of learning to read, write, and speak in English after a lifetime of being denied full access to a formal education in their first languages. And yet, despite their ambivalent attitudes toward language and literacy acquisition in English, many of the women at the language centers persist in learning, committing themselves to hours of instruction daily for months, if not years, on end. Women continue to come to the language centers to be with their friends, to love and laugh and to support each other. Rather than focus solely on becoming proficient readers and writers of English for resettlement purposes, women in the language centers navigate relational movements, from gendered kin-scripts to circles of friendship that re(kin)figure literacy practices in diaspora. Through their stories of, conversations about, and performances of learning, women explore the kindred ties that bind them to each other. Their literacy practice becomes entwined with these efforts, as a labor of love at the "ends of kinship," a labor that connects them to the past while making way for an uncertain future. In the liminal space of protracted displacement, women sing and dance as friends, performing for each other, as well as for the wider community, the limits and possibilities of their literacy learning, beyond the accumulation and amalgamation of skills and resources for migration. Rather, it is in working gently at the limits of their language and literacy practices, and in reformulations of relational belonging, that the women of the language centers construct a space of practice that enables them to re(kin)script and re(kin)figure kinship, friendship, and learning in migration.

NOTES

[1] I chose to transcribe the Nepali words and phrases that appear throughout this English language text using Roman letters versus Nepali script (Devanāgarī), as this choice reflects the limits and potentials of my language knowledge and experience. I am aware, however, of recent efforts in writing studies to produce translations of Nepali texts using both Devanāgarī and English scripts, particularly Laura Gonzales' Designing Multilingual Experiences in Technical Communication. I find these efforts to be beautiful and rich in pluri- and translingual resources as well as in the promises and challenges of participatory translation practices. Being a learner but not being a native speaker of Nepali myself, I consulted with the following texts and persons to aid my transcription and translation process: A Course in Nepali by David Matthews, A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of Nepali Language by R. L. Turner and D. R. Turner, Basic Course in Spoken Nepali by Tkia B. Karki and Chij K. Shrestha as well as local sources, including learners and family members from the language centers. Any discrepancies, variances, or inaccuracies in the transcription and translation reflect my own emergent language skills and plurilingual learning process.

[2] Pseudonyms have been used.

[3] This study was reviewed under IRB project number 09-1007-02 with the support of the offices of the Fulbright-International Institute of Education and The Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States and Nepal/USEF-Nepal and in affiliation with the Caritas-Nepal regional sub-office and Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme in Jhapa, Nepal.

[4] Caritas Nepal's Bhutanese Refugee Education Programme implemented education programming at all levels and ages throughout the camps. Implementing agencies typically drew from camp leadership and community members to staff and run grassroots programs, while financial and organizational support came from worldwide donors or sponsoring agencies. All teachers and staff at the language centers came from within the Bhutanese refugee community and they set the goals, objectives, and daily agenda of education programming based on community input and in dialogue with NGO officers.

[5] Abi Maya is referring to the political situation in Bhutan that eventually led to the mass expulsion and migration of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees.

[6] Latang patang is a colloquial term that means different things in different contexts. During the transcription and translation process in Nepal, a family member of a language center participant translated it as "beating around the bush." Years later, a friend and family of a language center participant resettled in Ohio described it to me as "trying to do some work very fast but not getting it done." In the context of what Susmita is saying about older women learning English for resettlement, I take her meaning to refer to all the commotion around learning English, a "hurry up and learn English and then come [to the US]" mentality, that in Susmita's experience has not resulted in increased language and literacy acquisition.

[7] Tola is a Nepali unit of measurement.

[8] Tij is a festival of women celebrated in Nepal and North India in late August/early September.

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Precarious Citizenship:
Ambivalence, Literacy, and Prisoner Reentry

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KEYWORDS

The experience of being 'in the mainstream' is a concrete sensory experience of literally being in tune with a 'something' that's happening [. . .] The experience of being 'in the mainstream' is like a flotation device.
> —Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*

I met Conroy at a coffee shop in a southern college town.[1] A white man in his 60s with a thick, lolling drawl, Conroy had brought a stack about five inches high of syllabi and multiple drafts of papers he wrote for the college classes he took in prison. The material was dense: Althusser, Freud, Marx, Fanon, Crenshaw. This was no watered-down curriculum, and Conroy describes, as many of my other research participants have, the camaraderie that developed in the classroom between men who struggled together to engage with the arduous texts. He describes with matter-of-factness how quickly he became an important presence in the classroom and in the higher education in prison (HEP) program as a whole. The program director even asked him, specifically, he tells me, to sign up for a first-year writing class so that he might act as a model for the other students, a kind of covert embedded tutor. Conroy says he enjoyed helping several men with their writing, academic and otherwise. He never says directly that he is proud of the work he did in those classes, but judging from the stack of papers he has saved and the pride in his voice when he talks about not only *his* successes but those of the students he mentored, it is clearly meaningful to him to have his academic skill acknowledged and valued by the people he respects, particularly the program director.

But when Conroy was released from prison, he was in his early 60s with no college degree and a criminal record. He serves on the HEP program's advisory board, is well-connected to academics and activists in his community, is active in local politics, and is one of the most astute people I've had the pleasure of having a conversation with, but he says he can't even get a job at Wal-Mart. When we spoke in 2015, he was living in an RV behind his mechanic's house because he couldn't afford rent. He was getting by on his small social security check and by selling cannabis to a small number of trusted clients. "I really didn't want to go back to selling anything. I didn't think I'd smoke again, I had such a distaste for it," he told me. "But that's it, in a nutshell, I just persevere, I persist. That's all I can do."

Stories like Conroy's trouble the literacy myths that surround higher education in prison. The public support for higher education opportunities for currently (and, to some extent, formerly) in-

carcerated people has been building exponentially in the last decade. In 2015, the Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, offering Pell grants to some incarcerated students on an experimental basis for the first time since 1994. In 2021, the Consolidated Appropriations Act more permanently restored Pell eligibility for incarcerated students. As public support has grown, the value of academic literacy[2] for incarcerated students is framed slightly differently by different stakeholders. For corrections officials, HEP programs reduce recidivism rates by giving incarcerated people credentials they can use on the job market once they are released. For HEP program administrators, academic literacy offers opportunities for community-building, empowerment, and critical and personal reflection. Despite these differences, nearly all stakeholders agree that HEP programs should aid incarcerated people in reintegrating into mainstream society upon their release. As Alexandra Cavallaro agues, academic literacy has been deployed to address our nation's anxiety around the inclusion of people with incarceration experience within the citizenry. In public dialogue, across varied stakeholders, literacy is imagined as a mechanism through which incarcerated people might be made into productive, compliant citizens. As Cavallaro puts it, "In many educational contexts, there is frequently an easy conflation of literacy education and the production of good citizens" (2).

In this essay, I explore the ways formerly incarcerated people themselves imagine the relationship between literacy and citizenship. Feminist sociologist Sasha Roseneil argues, "[I]f we are to think seriously about citizenship and belonging—and the possibility of their transformation—in contemporary conjecture, we need to think *psycho-socio-analytically* about their affective politics, about the relationships between subjective experience relational and intersubjective dynamics, and socio-historical processes and power relations" ("Vicissitudes," 231). In other words, an analysis of the relationship between literacy and citizenship requires an account of the embodied, first-hand experiences of those whose citizenship and inclusion are of concern. Here, I take up Roseneil's call by analyzing the experiences of three formerly incarcerated people who participated in HEP programs and how literacy figures in their experiences with reentry[3]. This essay is part of a larger IRB-approved study involving 20 formerly incarcerated research participants who either took college courses while incarcerated or who enrolled in an institution of higher education after their release from prison.[4] The study consists of qualitative, semi-structured interviews about participants' experiences with prison, higher education, and reentry, as well as their beliefs about education, criminal punishment, and justice. All participants gave informed consent for their responses to be used in scholarship with an agreement that their identities would be kept confidential. My approach to these interviews is informed by abolitionist feminism, which aims to center the lived experiences of directly impacted people in order to create greater justice in society. I approach these narratives as rhetorical performances produced in the moment and shaped by the situation itself (my positionality as audience, responsibility for representing a HEP program and incarcerated people generally, etc.). I want to present their words with as little filter as possible in order to allow their expertise and perspectives to inform, rather than to be objects of analysis. The research participants represented in this essay are:

- Conroy, a white man in his 60s from a college town in the South. Conroy had some college experience prior to his incarceration, but he did not earn a degree. He was incarcerated

multiple times. During his most recent incarceration at a minimum security state prison, he took college courses for credit, and after release, he served on the college's advisory board. Conroy was interviewed for this study in 2015.

- Grace, a white woman in her 40s from a mid-sized Midwest city. Grace had some college experience prior to her incarceration, but she did not earn a degree. During her incarceration in a maximum security state prison, she participated in two different HEP programs, earning an undergraduate degree. After her release, she enrolled in a graduate program but did not finish. Grace was interviewed for this study in 2015.

- Saul, a Black man in his 40s from a large Midwest city. Saul was incarcerated at the age of 15. During his 19 years of incarceration, he earned his GED and enrolled in credit-bearing college courses through several community colleges and one HEP program. Saul was interviewed for this study in both 2015 and 2018, but this essay focuses on our 2018 interview.

The transition out of prison, known commonly as prisoner reentry, echoes dissonantly through my interviews as a point of tension between the promises and realities of a second chance. In our conversations about the value of academic literacy in their lives, it is most often participants' stories about reentry where this largely positive narrative falters, as it does in Conroy's above. While prison literacy is receiving more attention in composition studies, few studies have taken up the role of literacy in reentry. One notable exception is Patrick Berry's *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, which includes a chapter on the experiences of one former student after he is released from prison. Berry concludes that expecting literacy to solve social problems is unrealistic, particularly for formerly incarcerated people who face myriad legal discriminations in their efforts to reintegrate in the world outside of prison, including housing, employment, voting rights, and many others. But for Berry, HEP programs offer an alternative space within the prison and an opportunity to reimagine oneself and society. Here, I build on Berry's work, offering narratives with a slightly more conflicted perspective on literacy and reentry. To be clear, all of my participants are enthusiastic supporters of higher education in prison programs. They are emphatic that educational opportunities for incarcerated people must be protected and expanded. The value of ethnography is in its specificity, and I offer these narratives not as a claim that this research is more true than Berry's, but as also true, to hold alongside more straightforwardly positive literacy narratives. Like Berry, I agree that narrow definitions of success in HEP programs based on upward mobility are unhelpful, and I agree that attention should be paid to the value of HEP while students are still incarcerated. Certainly, there are tremendous benefits to participating in HEP, even for students who are serving life sentences. At the same time, it is important to attend to the experiences of reentry and the ways students' academic literacy is taken up and imagined through that difficult transitional period.

Across my interviews, reentry is experienced as a significant rupture in the lifeworlds of my participants. It is a challenging time marked by disorientation, as the competencies and strategies that helped them navigate prison life are often no longer as useful. Indeed, for those who served longer sentences, the disorientation can be quite literal as their world expands beyond the few paved yards they are allowed to traverse on a daily basis. Following Kate Vieira, I am interested in the ways my research participants take up academic literacy as a navigational technology (27) and the ways

literacy, actual and imagined, creates pathways and barriers for their movement from prison to the next phases of their lives.

For Conroy, Grace, and Saul, literacy is taken up ambivalently.[5] For each, their academic literacy offers pathways to meaningful connections and, to some extent, mainstream inclusion. For Grace and Saul, it also offers pathways for upward mobility. But each also convey some distrust with regards to academic literacy and the pathway to inclusion it seems to offer. This ambivalence, I argue, points to tensions in the connection between academic literacy and mainstream citizenship and inclusion. By analyzing the ambivalence my participants expressed about both academic literacy and inclusion in mainstream citizenry, I hope to offer insight into possible interventions for, as well as limitations of, academic literacy for people with incarceration experience. My aim is to call attention to the ways literacy and inclusion/exclusion are invoked, and to urge composition scholars to more critically address the question of academic literacy as citizenship training for marginalized students. If increased access and participation are goals of HEP, and higher education in general, then we must grapple with the unique and shifting ways citizenship is both practiced by and denied to formerly incarcerated people, including those with advanced literacy.

LITERACY'S CRUEL OPTIMISM OF CIVIC INCLUSION

Over the last decade, the United States has been witnessing a striking shift in ideology about criminal justice, which was brought about both by the important activist work of organizations like Critical Resistance, Prison Policy Initiative, and others, but also by the economic and social crisis of mass incarceration. The United States simply cannot afford to keep locking people up at the current rate, and increasingly, states and municipalities are being forced to reckon with the unsustainability of overly punitive policies and with what to do with people once they have been released from prisons and jails. This crisis of mass incarceration has produced what appears to be a crisis of inclusion, as the assumptions about who should be forgiven, by whom, and to what extent remain largely uncertain. While calls for criminal justice reform, including increased access and support for formerly incarcerated people, has gained significant and increasing support, the enthymematic arguments for these reforms continue to rely on a logic of relative innocence through reference to what Marie Gottschalk calls the "non, non, nons": people convicted of non-violent, non-sexual, non-serious acts (xvi). These individuals are gaining relative acceptance and inclusion within the democratic imaginary and in public discourse, but legal and material inclusion continues to lag behind. Further, this relative forgiveness and inclusion takes for granted that those who fall outside this relative innocence are deserving of long, harshly punitive prison sentences and permanent exclusion from employment, education, and other areas of public life. While the notion of a second chance is gaining traction, the question of who gets that second chance is still very contentious.

As Robert Asen suggests, citizenship should be recognized "as a fluid, multimodal, and quotidian process" (203). Thus, even formerly incarcerated people whose legal status defines them as "full citizens" may not enjoy the full protections of civic and social inclusion. Danielle Allen similarly defines citizenship as "basic habits of interaction in public spaces" (5). She goes on to show that social and

political order is maintained not only through institutions but through "'deep rules' that prescribe specific interactions among citizens in public spaces" (10). These paradigms of citizenship suggest ways to consider the practice of citizenship beyond privileged acts, such as voting, but they also point to the ways that exclusion from full citizenship is enacted in everyday ways. Ediberto Roman argues, "The typical point of demarcation or basis for distinction—national borders—was not the basis for and does not adequately explain the subordination of some groups within the national boundaries" (10). Of course, the alienizing function of the prison, creating precarious citizenship for those inside national borders, has deep connections to racialized methods of exclusion. Just as Ersula Ore shows that lynching was a spectacle that maintained the racial hierarchy inherent in American citizenry, the carceral regime and its various forms of dehumanization and legal discrimination is a mechanism that maintains racist social and legal exclusions, particularly for Black and Indigenous people, in the United States. As Stephen Dillon argues, "By racial terror in a genealogy of the prison, scholars have come to understand the barracoons, coffles, slave holds, and plantations of the Middle Passage as spatial, discursive, ontological, and economic analogues of modern punishment that have haunted their way into the present" (114). That white people find themselves entangled in this system does not make its racialized function any less true.

As the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion for formerly incarcerated people shifts, academic literacy in the form of HEP becomes a central mechanism for determining one's worthiness for inclusion. Romana Fernandez writers, "Imagining literate selves allows us, whoever we may be, to envision community, nation, and ultimately world […] Imagining literacy allows us to project a future self with yet-to-be-acquired skills and a yet-to-be-defined professional life" (11). In other words, the way we imagine literacy for ourselves and others is intimately connected to the way we imagine our community and its boundaries of inclusion. As Amy Wan has shown, as a field, rhetoric and composition has outlined a variety of ways that literacy is imagined to shape participatory citizenship and inclusion[6]. I agree with Wan that we as literacy educators and scholars must unpack the unspoken assumptions about the citizenship we imagine ourselves to offer access to.

> *"You're still going to be outside looking in. You might permeate that bubble for a bit, but when you come back out of that bubble, you know, you're back in the reality of where you're living."*

In my conversation with Conroy, I asked him to speculate on what higher education in prison programs could do to mitigate the forms of exclusion he was experiencing after release from prison. I wondered if these programs might make efforts to extend their work and support beyond the prison walls, but Conroy seemed skeptical of this idea:

> Gives you false expectations of what reality is going to give you. You're still going to be outside looking in. You might permeate that bubble for a bit, but when you come back out of that bubble, you know, you're back in the reality of where you're living. I think it's better to, like, to make an analogy? You go over here and do some heroin, then you leave and the heroin wears off. It's diminishing returns, or an investment in pain, so to speak. The reward

> you get for that short period of time is more than decimated by the withdrawal from it afterwards.

For Conroy, the value of HEP is in its ability to offer an escape from the repetition and violence of prison life. His experience with HEP has little to do with how it might impact reality. By continuing a person's contact with the program, he feels it would only be giving those individual's false hope about the reality of their lives outside of prison, "an investment in pain," because they simply will not have the opportunity nor the inner resources to use their experiences with an education program to create a meaningful life for themselves inside the "bubble" of the mainstream.

Put another way, Conroy's warning is an implicit critique of HEP's "cruel optimism," what Lauren Berlant defines as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (94). For Conroy, the object of desire, mainstream inclusion and financial security, is an unattainable fantasy. Maintaining a connection to that fantasy, though it may have helped him survive prison, is as noxious as heroin. Hope is a common theme around which prison educators rally, desiring to instill a sense of purpose and agency for their students for whom stark despair is never far. What Conroy is suggesting, then, is that this is precisely the benefit of prison programs, providing a fantasy of inclusion, community, and recognition that, in reality, will never come.

But there is an inherent ambivalence in Conroy's perspective on literacy and reentry. On the one hand, he recognizes the material and social limits of literacy and suggests that the hope inherent in the pursuit of literacy, in the end, does more harm than good. On the other hand, his success with academic literacy and his connection to university professors is clearly important for his narrative and sense of self, especially in contrast to the version of himself reflected by the state and some of his family members. Conroy's perspective on hope is also ambivalent. When I asked how he was handling what sounded like a very challenging time in his life, he said:

> It's by no means easy. I'm used to traveling, I'm used to the so-called finer things of life and all the trappings that go with it, and it's just evaporated. It's just gone. But we keep struggling and move on. You know in *Shawshank Redemption* where he said, hope is a good thing and in a final analysis hope might be the only thing? I'm paraphrasing, but that's a very true statement. That's what it is, that's what you have to do. Just keep pressing on. If you stop, then you'll be consumed, you'll be destroyed. And that happens to a lot of people in this situation.

Conroy argues that higher education in prison is still worth it, because even if the experience is just something fun that is quickly forgotten, it is still an opportunity to make contact with positive people. My research and experience with HEP keeps me from fully agreeing with Conroy's assessment, but I want to honor the truth of this skepticism and what it reflects about his lived experience. His narrative also offers an important counter to the under-examined assumptions about higher education as a tool for increased agency, access, and inclusion for formerly incarcerated people. Wan rightly points out that composition's "ambient" citizenship promotes a sense that citizenship and access to political agency is equally available to all students who are willing to work for it. Instead, Wan concludes that "[p]articipation through literacy skills allows for the sense of being equal, maybe even the illusion if equality. But I wonder if it is possible that in investment in this narrative is dangerous

because we imagine that equality and full citizenship can be accessed via classroom-cultivated literacy" (31). In other words, without attending to the fact that different forms of participatory democracy are available to different students, compositionists perpetuate the bootstraps myth of full citizenship, where any diminished or denied inclusion is an individual failure. Alexandra Cavallaro rightly points out that these problems and contradictions persist in HEP programs, noting that they often fail to account for the ways citizenship eludes incarcerated students in spite of their educational pursuits. It is important for prison educators and HEP programs not to promise more than they deliver, but I also argue that in order for higher education to be "worth it," it must offer more than fleeting feelings of companionship and temporary escape from the monotony and dehumanization of everyday prison life (2–3). If the purposes of higher education attend primarily to the emotional needs of incarcerated students while they are inside, these programs risk becoming mere supplements to the white supremacist carceral regime that trades in cruel optimism.

ACADEMIC LITERACY AS FRAUGHT COMMUNITY

Unlike, Conroy, Grace had material and social support after release, but reentry was still a very challenging experience. For herself, she identifies meaningful inclusion in a community as the most challenging part of reentry. Grace had a lot going for her in prison. On top of the bachelor's degree she earned, she had respect, a relatively well-paying job (by prison standards), and was a tutor for other incarcerated women.

> You learn how to create this life that is really meaningful, one that is important, and then I didn't have anybody. I had no friends. In one day. And you're not supposed to keep in touch with them. So I'm not supposed to talk to them, and nobody out here understands what I'm dealing with. They all think I should just be happy that I'm not in prison. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing out here. And I have nobody I can talk to about that because people think that you're not happy. But I would have rather gone back to prison. It took me years to get over that feeling. And I think that if, with everything I had, I had this problem, what about other people who don't have anything?

That pull back to the meaningful life crafted in prison is something several research participants have shared with me, but it is rarely addressed in research about reentry. Grace argues that rather than reentry, with its emphasis on employment and housing, we should be talking about reintegration. Grace says, "How do we make sure that people are able to find a community where they feel like they're valued, they feel like they're still important? Because they had that when they were in prison. It is a community. And I think to not acknowledge that does more damage."

And Grace is acutely aware of the ways formerly incarcerated people are excluded from mainstream society. She tells me that when she got out of prison, she had no intention of telling anyone about her incarceration. She wanted to keep her head down, do her parole time, and leave the state as soon as possible. But as invitations to talk about her experience came to her, Grace recognized that her experience in prison and ability to speak thoughtfully about it endowed her with a certain fraught expert status. Grace ultimately decided that coalition-building, or at least increased public

understanding and empathy, are important and require formerly incarcerated people sharing their stories. Grace's first experience with public disclosure, however, was painful for her. She was interviewed for a local newspaper article:

> I was not at all prepared for that. I mean, I agreed to it, I knew what was happening, but I was still very naïve. They were just beginning their online thing, so the story was online and the comments were just awful. […] I literally just sat in my room and cried for three days. I was not prepared for how brutal these people were who didn't even know me, you know? And I thought at the time I was doing this good thing, trying to share my story. And that just completely backfired and I was just devastated by that.

This experience threw into sharp relief the contrast between the respect and community Grace experienced in prison and the lack of community in reentry. She would have to navigate this new hostile world to put together a new kind of life and identity for herself. After some years of struggle, Grace seems to have put together a meaningful community on the outside. She brought a friend to our interview to advocate on her behalf, should the interview go badly, and to provide emotional support. We conducted the interview at her workplace, a community center where she works, appropriately enough, in community development.

One of the ways Grace attempted to navigate reentry was through continuing her education. She had received a lot of support from former HEP instructors, both while incarcerated and after she was released. It made sense, then, to continue developing this part of her identity as a student and scholar. In the disorienting break between the community of the prison and the lack of community on the outside, literacy was a handy navigational tool.

But the transition from the HEP program to attending college on a traditional campus was more difficult to navigate than she imagined. She realized that the expectation for prospective graduate students is that because they have an undergraduate degree, they must be familiar with campus culture and the bureaucracy of higher education. Because Grace completed her undergraduate degree while incarcerated, her university experience was very different: "[W]hen you're in prison it's all taken care of for you. They fill out the financial aid forms for you, they do all the enrollment. They tell you what classes you're going to take. They order the books for you. Literally every single thing is done for you. So you don't know how to function in that world when you get out." Grace describes the feeling of trying to orient herself on campus, unable to

"All those people, I just felt so intimidated. I felt like everybody's going to know I was in prison. And I'm not smart enough to be here. I don't know what I'm doing."

figure out where to park and feeling overwhelmed by the size of the place. Like many people incarcerated in the 1990s during the rise of the internet, her digital literacy confidence level was low, so the online admissions and financial aid processes were intimidating and unwelcoming. She was expecting class sizes to be comparable to the classes she had taken in prison, which were capped at 15, but when she arrived on the first day, she found that the class had about thirty students enrolled.

> I literally had a panic attack on campus. Walked out the door and was like, I can't do this. I

couldn't breathe. I couldn't drive home. I had to call my grandparents to come get me. All those people, I just felt so intimidated. I felt like everybody's going to know I was in prison. And I'm not smart enough to be here. I don't know what I'm doing. So I also didn't understand that if you're not going to go, you actually have to drop those classes. Just not going completely screws you for the rest of your life. So I paid for the classes, paid in full for the classes, but I didn't actually drop them, so I had three Fs on my record to begin with.

What emerges from Grace's story, implicitly and explicitly stated, is that from her perspective, there is "such a stigma around college campuses against people who have been incarcerated before." She continues to be shocked that there is a separate admissions review for people who have criminal backgrounds. In "Going Public—in a Disabling Discourse," Linda Flower argues that our field's celebration of rhetorical empowerment through critique, self-expression, and advocacy fails to recognize the risk associated with publicly disclosing that one identifies with a marginalized group (137). In her inquiry into the identity disclosures of students with learning disabilities, Flower finds that the decision whether or not to disclose "pits the option of getting the help and accommodations they may need against the socially hazardous outcomes of being labeled LD" (138). Grace, keenly aware of stigma, seemed reluctant to identify publicly as formerly incarcerated in this instance, and she tells me she knows people would tell her that she can't expect special treatment just because she's been in prison. Also, given her lack of knowledge about the workings of universities, the risk associated with disclosure was likely greater than the possibility that it would get her the help she needed. As Flower points out, disclosure is intensely rhetorical by nature and "demands not only self-expression but also understanding rhetorical situations, constructing new meanings, and creating a dialogic relationship with others" (147). Grace didn't know to whom to appeal, much less how to construct a successful argument in that situation. Years later, she tried once again to earn her master's degree in criminal justice, but she says that a series of health problems and her struggles with statistics (she tells me it was only after failing the course twice that she learned that the campus had a math tutoring center she could have utilized) led to her dismissal from the university.

Academic literacy presented itself as a clear navigational tool in Grace's attempt to build a meaningful community for herself, but her lack of experience with the "hidden curriculum" of higher education created insurmountable barriers. She could not literally navigate the campus, much less the various bureaucratic processes without potentially making herself vulnerable to ridicule and rejection. Grace's intellectual life, like Conroy's, plays an important role in the narrative she shares with me, and her success in her HEP programs and continued connection to college faculty are important identity markers for her, so much so that applying for a master's program was one of the first things she did when she was released from prison. Grace's ambivalence toward academic literacy emerges in response to the spoken and unspoken ways she is marked as an outsider in the traditional academy. The college campus and its bureaucratic structure communicate to her that she is unwelcome, that she is a misfit.

THE COSTS OF MAINSTREAM INCLUSION

Like Grace's story, Saul's story on the surface fulfills all the promise of higher education in prison, but his experience with reentry reveals deep ambivalence about the form of inclusion advanced literacy offered to him. When I spoke to Saul in 2018, he had been out of prison for almost five years. He was off parole and had a white-collar job with a tech company, a job that he got specifically because of his experience with a higher education in prison program. The job was downtown, and in our conversation, "downtown" emerged as an important metaphor for the mainstream, the privileged, and full citizenship. But Saul's relationship with "downtown" was fraught.

> I've come to realize that most often although I'm doing everything that I know how to be, like, fully integrated? I feel like I don't fit. I sense in people that they sense the difference in me. […] And it's noticeable to me. There've been certain situations where it's more obvious to me that someone sees me as different. For an example, I work downtown, and downtown people . . . downtown people can be a little different from everyone else […] They seem to live in a world of privilege. It cloaks them so they are totally covered in this privilege blanket. […] I barely even get eye contact in passing. It's so funny because it's so noticeable. Like you're attempting to not see other humans. It's amazing to me. I've literally seen people walking on the same side of the street, notice me because I'm standing in front of the building for a smoke break, I see them notice me, they'll cross and then cross back once they [get past me]. Like, hmm, that was a little suspect. Was that all for me? [laugh] People don't like to sit next to me on the train either. Like, sometimes, it can . . . hurt my feelings a little bit. To the point where 99% of the time I won't even attempt to sit down on the train just because . . . it bothers me, it gets under my skin to where it's like, I see them see me, and then, like, I need to choose to go somewhere else rather than take this seat next to this guy.

Saul had a middle-class, stable job, his own apartment, and he was getting ready to be married and become a father for the first time. His academic literacy provided him access to mainstream citizenry in many of the ways we tend to imagine in composition studies, yet his exclusion remains in subtle social gestures and felt senses. I asked what it feels like, this sense that others can sense that he doesn't fit. He tells me it's an "old feeling," one he experienced early. As an example, he shares a story about a time when he was a child, walking from his mostly Black neighborhood to the movie theater in an adjacent white neighborhood, where he was stopped by the cops and questioned about what he was doing there. Similarly, when he goes downtown for work, he says he feels distrust from those around him, a sense that "the areas that I go, the people that I have to interact with don't really want me in those areas interacting with them." I asked if he meant people who haven't been to prison, or white people, or "downtown" people. He said, laughing, "I guess the irony is that most of those people are people that haven't been to prison, that are white, and that actively enjoy that privilege blanket."

Saul's reentry experience is marked by a limit to his reintegration into mainstream society, a limit he is uncertain he will ever cross. This limit is dictated, at least in part, by a convergence of alienizing and carceral logics. Karma Chavez defines a logic as "a structure of thinking that thereby structures expression" (5) and alienizing logic as "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). For Saul, anti-Blackness is the alienizing logic that marked him as an outsider, as suspect, as dangerous long before he was ever incarcerated, when he was a child, and it continues to structure his access to full citizenship. By the same token, carceral logics, or structures of thinking that support punitive approaches to difference and deviance, deepen Saul's exclusion through a kind of common sense that people who have been convicted of crimes should be, to some extent, permanently punished through exclusion to economic, civil, and social power. For Saul, "reentry" into mainstream society is impossible, as it would require that he was included in mainstream society to begin with.

In some ways, Saul's experience is the opposite of Conroy's. Conroy uses literacy to define himself as something other and against his incarceration, but he is excluded from the material benefits of advanced literacy. Saul's literacy grants him access to material benefits and middle-class income, but he lacks the social acceptance within mainstream society that Conroy enjoys (and that he, as a white man, had greater access to prior to incarceration). But Saul's incomplete integration is not merely the result of other people's subtle (and not so subtle) social rejection of him. Saul understands that fully integrating into the mainstream requires that he himself accept the alienizing and carceral logics that mark him as unworthy of belonging. He would have to reject his prison experience, as Conroy so eagerly does. But Saul feels ambivalent about severing that part of his identity.

> *"I can say today, I like me. I kind of know and did a lot of work to figure out who I am and to be comfortable in that, like, oh, you're this guy. I like that guy. So how do I, and knowing that my prison experience aided in that revelation, that acceptance, how do I get rid of that and hold on to who I've become? I don't know if it's possible."*

> On the one hand, you would think I want to get as far away from prison, the thoughts of prison, that experience, that I want to fully immerse myself in the world and be encompassed in everything worldly and leave the prison stuff behind. But the realization that I was there for so long . . . . At one point, I was literally incarcerated longer than I was alive. The bulk of my life was incarcerated. So, that experience has helped form and is a part of the foundation of who I've become, who I am now. And before I was locked up, I didn't like myself much. I couldn't *love* me. I was arrested four months before my 16th birthday and got out a month from my 35th birthday. I can say today, I *like* me. I kind of know and did a lot of work to figure out who I am and to be comfortable in that, like, oh, you're *this* guy. I like that guy. So how do I, and knowing that my prison experience aided in that revelation, that acceptance, how do I get rid of that and hold on to who I've become? I don't know if it's possible.

For Saul, for reentry to be complete and for him to feel like "a normal person" would require more than his own immersion into the mainstream. It would require that the mainstream itself shift to

accommodate him, to reflect that love and acceptance he has for himself, including the entirety of his experience. According to Cavallaro, most HEP programs, doubly sponsored by the state through the prison and the university, imagine normative citizenship as the goal of literacy and assimilation as a marker of the redeemed "good citizen" (3). HEP programs engage in what Eric Darnell Pritchard calls *literacy normativity*, the use of literacy "to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm" (28). In the case of HEP, literacy normativity may be deployed in an effort to help incarcerated people, and Saul would agree that having a "downtown" job is preferable to financial precarity. But the price of assimilation into a mainstream that is not itself just is painful. Any literacy program that focuses on individual achievement with little or no critical interrogation of ambient citizenship is complicit in the painful exclusions inherent to the mainstream.

IMPLICATIONS

Producing participatory democratic agents is the *raison d'être* of most higher education in prison programs. But as these case studies suggest, the credentialing and normative functions of higher education do not necessarily lead to increased civic or social inclusion, nor does academic literacy necessarily translate to successful reentry and integration. For composition scholars and practitioners, this suggests a need to, as Wan says, directly confront unequal access in our pedagogy and acknowledge the limits of personal volition in achieving full citizenship. Wan explains, "In order for writing classrooms to enact citizenships that matter, we need to recognize the ways that our idealized notions of citizenship are complicit in the citizenship that already exists" (178). Erica Meiners similarly critiques the university for its role in what she refers to as a "punishing democracy" (vii), marked by a shift in the state's resources from education and empowerment to incarceration, thus exacerbating historical inequalities, particularly for Black Americans: "That is, these institutions do not merely reflect existing structures of power but reproduce and even exacerbate them: Studying the relationship between prison and schools thus enables us to dive into the structural question of how the state invests in punishment, how it disinvests in communities hit hard by crime, and how its economic and educational policies therefore fuel the prison-industrial complex" (18).

> *"What forms of belonging are we practicing in our classrooms? What social imaginaries do we maintain or create anew? As literacy brokers, educators are also brokers of access to mainstream inclusion. We are implicated uncomfortably in the oppression of those structurally excluded."*

What forms of belonging are we practicing in our classrooms? What social imaginaries do we maintain or create anew? As literacy brokers, educators are also brokers of access to mainstream inclusion. We are implicated uncomfortably in the oppression of those structurally excluded. The simplest solution to this discomfort is to modulate our promises to our students, and certainly we

should not suggest that literacy is a key that will open all doors. But simply including caveats to our teaching abdicates the power literacy does have in creating and maintaining ways of thinking and being. While a full pedagogical and institutional solution is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to suggest that we literacy scholars and composition teachers must resist the flattery of narratives like the one that suggests our work can solve the complex knot of problems inherent in oppression. Further, while acknowledging our limited power to disrupt as agents of the state, we must look to our own classrooms and ask what civic imaginaries and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion are brought into being there. Incarcerated people are by no means the only ones productively excluded from the democratic imaginary, subject to state violence, and treated as superfluous and disposable. But I argue, along with Meiners, Andrew Dilts, and others that the same carceral logics of punishment and control, of security and exclusion—these hallmarks of neoliberal risk society—are shared across a host of various modes of exclusion. So while the alienation, humiliation, and violence experienced by incarcerated people may appear to be extreme examples, the ambivalent experiences with literacy described by Saul, Grace, and Conroy are likely not all that different from the ways folks are making do against other, interrelated mechanisms of civic exclusion, including in our mainstream college writing classes. If, as Meiners suggests, the university has had a role in creating that reality, then it must have some ability to shift that reality, though there are significant political and administrative restraints to doing so.

For Conroy, Grace, and Saul, literacy holds a peculiar role in their reentry narratives. In each, academic literacy holds some important orienting power. For Conroy, his academic success is a source of pride and an important pillar of his identity, which he holds in contrast to the criminalizing narratives that keeps him economically, socially, and politically marginalized. But Conroy's academic literacy is also a false hope, an "investment in pain," that fails to fulfill its promise. For Grace, academic literacy was supposed to be a continuity from prison to reentry, something she excelled at and used to orient her path to reintegration into mainstream society. But Grace found higher education disorienting, and rather than helping her to integrate, her experience with academic literacy reiterated her outsiderness. Saul's academic literacy did lead him to a kind of middle-class, mainstream inclusion, but it was a provisional inclusion that required that he hide or repudiate essential parts of himself. A full pedagogical solution is beyond the scope of the analysis I've presented here, and frankly, I do not believe any curriculum or pedagogy could fully solve the forms of exclusion Conroy, Grace, and Saul experienced, at least not any curriculum that would be allowed at most accredited universities, much less inside prisons. Literacy is powerful, but it is not all-powerful. It is a gate that opens but also locks.

Ramona Fernandez asserts that the way we imagine literacy *matters*, particularly for the most marginalized, who seek literacy as a path to a future self and future world they cannot always articulate or imagine clearly. For those of us who work with students whose futures are constrained, whose lives do not map easily onto the white middle-class projection of mainstream higher education, it is necessary to imagine along with our students the forms of civic inclusion they desire and the barriers they may face. We must listen and hold space for the material and social realities of our students' likely futures, which may look very different from our own, as well as their dogged, insistent hope, and create learning environments aimed at cultivating belonging rather than assimilation.

As a way of wrapping up our conversations, I asked each research participant to tell me what they would like for me to do with their stories. It was no small gesture to relive their experiences, to identify again with that place, even for just a couple of hours. I could see what it took out of them. I could hear in their voices the line in their memory they would walk right up to but never cross. I know there is so much they didn't tell me, about violence, trauma, shame, despair, fear, and while I'll never know exactly the shape of those things, I could feel their enormity as their wakes rippled in the space between us. So I wanted to know why. Why did they agree to talk with me? What were they hoping for that they would voluntarily and with little compensation relive some of the worst times of their lives? And every one of them said the same thing. They wanted their stories to be a beacon of hope for those still locked up, telling them, "Just don't give up. No matter what, don't give up."

NOTES

[1] All research participants are identified by a pseudonym.

[2] According to Mary R. Lea and Brian Street, academic literacy refers to the social practices required in academic settings, including both the reading, writing, and knowledge-making conventions of the various academic disciplines and of the discourses of the academic institution itself.

[3] Though "reentry" is the most commonly used term to describe the experience of leaving prison and reintegrating into this nomenclature. Loic Wacquant argues that "reentry" assumes a previous inclusion that in many cases was not there. My research participants similarly reject "reentry" as an apt term, preferring "reintegration" or simply "coming home." Here, I use the term "reentry" hesitantly, due to its pervasiveness and the lack of consensus around a viable alternative.

[4] University of Illinois IRB #15787. University of Texas Rio Grande Valley IRB #1151780-1.

[5] My understanding of ambivalence is indebted to Kaia Simon, whose work explores the ambivalence generation 1.5 Hmong women feel when performing translation labor at their workplaces. Simon shows that while these women are proud of their translingual literacies, they are not compensated or shown value in equitable ways in the workplace. Simon shows that translation practices are both an opportunity to serve the women's community and a marker of outsiderness, provoking stares from onlookers. For these women, as for my research participants, literacy offers a pathway to increased opportunities, but not full acceptance or inclusion.

[6] This connection is reflected in a tension in composition scholarship and practice. On the one hand, first year composition's service ethic, as Sharon Crowley has shown, derives from its origins as an institutional mechanism for regulating and assimilating the literacy practices of students into those of the university, particularly as universities began admitting more people of color, women, and students from lower socio-economic classes. This results in a sense that composition offers non-mainstream, structurally oppressed students a pathway into mainstream social and economic success, an ethos reflected in Patricia Bizzell's "Composition Studies Saves the World!" On the other hand, new literacy studies has long worked against the notion that literacy achievement results in social, political, and economic benefits as a matter of course, reflected in the work of Harvey Graff, Brian Street, James Gee, Sylvia Scribner, and others. Most literacy studies scholarship, in fact, reflects concerns with citizenship, civic efficacy, inclusion, belonging, assimilation, and related terms. A few recent examples include work on literacy tests for voter registration (Kirk Branch; Tabetha Adkins), global citizenship and its challenges for international students at US universities (Tom McNamara; Yu-Kyung Kang), the role of composition in navigating the civic sphere (Juan Guerra), and challenges to the notion that literacy is a means to assimilation (Kate Vieira).

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Citing Oral Histories in Literacy Studies

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KEYWORDS

oral history; inclusive citation praxis; Great Divide; homelessness;
narratives of resiliency

In 2012, a 32-year-old woman named Jazz was only months away from graduating from St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Before matriculating at "St. Kate's," Jazz experienced sudden immersion in whiteness when she moved from Chicago to Minnesota as a young girl. Then, as a young woman, she faced predatory loans and non-accredited education options, housing instability, homelessness, addiction, single motherhood, and obstruction from the education system. Her path back into that system, despite the obstacles named here, required overcoming debt, non-transferable credits, and, once she matriculated, ignorance from her peers about poverty, Blackness, and homelessness. Jazz's experiences required literacy of and navigation through some of the most complex and problematic systems in the United States. Her participation in an oral history project helps others see the gaps in these systems, the ways that people overcome them, and how various forms of literacy operate within the systems that she navigates.

Jazz donated her oral history interview to the St. Catherine University (SCU) Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project, one of many collaborations that document the perspectives and knowledge of people who have been historically excluded from academic discourse and historical record. Literacy scholars make remarkable contributions to these forms of collaborations by conducting interviews to learn more about how writing and literacy function outside of academia as much as within. Oral histories are particularly important in these efforts because they are recorded with the intent to archive in public record voices that are historically excluded. However, despite the hundreds of oral history projects that do exactly this, the use of these recordings as *sources* is rare among literacy scholars. Searching the archives in a sample of literacy journals for articles with the phrase "oral history" and "oral histories" published in the last five years yields only eight results: authors in two of these eight articles use existing oral histories as a source, and authors in six of the eight articles record new oral histories but do not make the narratives available to the reader. These numbers suggest that literacy scholars as a whole are not considering oral histories as a valuable source for their research and the research of others. I note these practices not as a critique of scholars for not using and/or not making available oral histories, but as an opportunity to expand how citation of oral histories can enrich and dimensionalize inclusion efforts in the field.

More deliberate citation of oral histories would support methods and approaches that undermine the "Great Divide" between oral and written language that continues to haunt literacy discourse. I situate this exploration as continuing Amy Wan's focus on how paying attention to "researcher

positionality" can be "used alongside antiracist and decolonial approaches to literacy studies" (109), a positionality that is in relationship with what she calls "the growing awareness of citation politics" (117). After summarizing some of the unique qualities of oral histories that make them particularly helpful to undermining the "Great Divide," I present in more depth the data showing how oral histories are used in a sample of literacy journals. I then explore Jazz's oral history narrative as a case study that shows how oral histories offer forms of knowledge that can enrich literacy research.[1] The primary goal of this article is to suggest that more intentional use of oral histories as primary resources could enrich ongoing efforts of inclusion among literacy journals. In other words, I propose that Wan's observation of the "growing expectation for a more critical approach to who we cite as literacy scholars" (117) might apply not only to *who* we cite but also to *what*.[2]

WHY CITE ORAL HISTORIES?

Before showing in detail how oral history is being used in a sample of literacy discourse, I suggest why it is important to do so. Scholars within this field and in so many cousin disciplines use a variety of oral forms—not at all limited to interviewing—to study composition and literacy. For example, Elias Dominguez Barajas's study on the rhetorical use of audience engagement uses an oral performance given in a family setting (148), and Warren Cariou explores what he calls "life-telling," an oral form applicable to all communities but particularly to Indigenous "artists, knowledge-keepers, and teachers" (314). Even within interviewing techniques, scholars use a range of approaches. Kathryn Roulston points out that there are as many approaches to interviewing as there are epistemologies,

"I do not search for oral histories in select literacy journals to argue for an ideal form of pure oral history, but to emphasize the irony that oral histories are seldom cited when—unlike other forms of interviews—they could be. "

which might range from "[n]eopositivist, emotionalist or romantic, constructionist, transformative, decolonizing, and new materialist" (np). These epistemologies apply to a variety of interview methods, including oral surveys, qualitative interviews, oral history interviews, and methods falling between labeled approaches. For example, Kaia Simon uses "semi-structured oral literacy history interviews" (5) with women who were children at the time that their families relocated as Hmong refugees to the United States (6), and Suzanne Marie Enck and Blake A. McDaniel collect "semi-structured oral history interviews" with incarcerated women to study the relationship between storytelling and agency (44). I do not search for oral histories in select literacy journals to argue for an ideal form of pure oral history, but to emphasize the irony that oral histories are seldom cited when—unlike other forms of interviews—they could be.

Though oral histories and qualitative interviews are not opponents—indeed, their praxis and the study of that praxis overlaps significantly—their shared traits help to highlight their differences. Sharan Merriam and Robin Grenier summarize that the goal of qualitative interviewing is "to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, an individual, or a situation" (20); an interview study

is deemed valid if the interviews proposed will contribute to the researcher's discipline. Merriam and Grenier add that "The mere fact that this topic has not been previously investigated does not, in and of itself, justify doing the research; maybe there's no need to know the answers" (20). Oral histories, on the other hand, operate with an understanding that recordings of voices and communities that have not before contributed to archival records are inherently valuable. Many oral history practitioners understand oral histories as a tool for social justice, making possible what John Duffy calls "a more inclusive and democratic kind of history" (98). Oral historians Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki show how feminist oral history praxis, which developed in earnest in the early 1990s and early 2000s (97–8), frames oral history-making as not only a way to create "primary source material," but also "an ethical and political practice that has since been shown to have value in and of itself" (98). If qualitative interviews seek "answers," oral histories seek opportunities for individuals and communities to share what they know, feel, and wonder about.

Released from the requirement of seeking answers, oral histories are well suited to spark conversation. Oral historian Linda Shopes writes that "[o]ral history is, at its heart, a dialogue" ("Making Sense"), and many oral historians agree with her.[3] Duffy explains the ability for oral histories to make visible multi-directional power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee as a "co-operative undertaking, as researcher and informant collaborate in the construction of the past" (87). Often, the dialogue does not occur through a single conversation, but through a series of conversations that build relationship(s) over time. Sheftel and Zembrzycki emphasize the importance of the *slowness* of the oral history process, from relationship and trust building with participants, to taking breaks during interviews, to sitting with, rather than editing out, "the very real circumstances—uncomfortable and difficult moments, silences, interpretive conflicts, ethics of inequality, and the distance created by political differences—in which stories are told" (98).

> *"If qualitative interviews seek "answers," oral histories seek opportunities for individuals and communities to share what they know, feel, and wonder about."*

While several qualitative researchers have urged practitioners of qualitative interviews to be more transparent about the "interactional organization" of interviews (Potter and Hepburn 566), and to more explicitly explore in what ways an interview is "co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee" (Talmy 27), oral histories bake transparency and acknowledgment of dialogue into the process.

Finally, I am focusing on citing oral histories *because we can.* One of the driving spirits of oral history-making is that they will become publicly available—specifically beyond academia. Sheftel and Zembrzycki describe this as part of the "collaborative commitment" of oral history, with an aim to "communicate with a wider public (not just a niche group of academics)" (104). This tenet contrasts with the many forms of qualitative interviews that are subject to IRB approval. While qualitative researchers must convince IRB committees that their protocols will protect the privacy and identities of their participants, oral histories are "defined by the assumption that interviews are conducted for the permanent record and are to be made publicly available" ("Oral History").[4] Oral histories thus

make unnecessary the many concerns of some qualitative researchers when assessing the validity of qualitative interviews. For example, Merriam and Grenier suggest, among other practices, that a researcher using qualitative interviews interrogates how their own interpretation of "reality" affects what is being studied (26); Steven Talmy critiques researchers' tendency to isolate quotations from interviewees absent of the interviewer's question or other context (31); and Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn argue that interviews need to more "[fully displaying] the active role of the interviewer" (556). These important critiques of, and proposed standards for, qualitative interviews are an effect of the transcripts and audio files being unavailable to anyone beyond the researcher. Studies using qualitative interviews invite other scholars to cite the research using the interviews, whereas oral histories make it possible for scholars to cite the interview and/or its participants directly.

This is not to say that oral histories ignore questions about privacy and safety of participants. Shopes explains that when interviewees are given the option to speak under a pseudonym or anonymously, they often choose to be identified: "Typically, narrators are proud of having contributed their story to the permanent record and wish to be associated with it" ("Oral History, Human Subjects"). For narrators who require or prefer more privacy, oral history best practices offer ways to honor privacy while making narratives public. For example, in the SCU project that includes Jazz's narrative, narrators are identified by their first name and only *some* of the entries include a photo ("SCU").[5] Further, only ten of the 14 narratives are currently available to the public, while the remaining four are "restricted until a future date" ("SCU").[6] Each of these measures considers the safety and comfort level of the participant and lets them choose the degree to which their donation is linked to their identity with the understanding that the conversion will be made public.

ORAL HISTORIES IN LITERACY STUDIES

To learn how literacy scholars engage with oral histories, I worked with a sample of journals based on representation in the past five years of the series *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition.* This annual anthology engages a wide readership to decide which articles best "showcase the innovative and transformative work now being published in the field's journals" (Pauszek, Girdharry, and Lesh). Of all the journal titles represented in the last five issues, three journals are represented every year: *Community Literacy Journal* (*CLJ), Reflections,* and *Literacy in Composition Studies* (*LiCS*) (Appendix A). I base my study on these three journals not to suggest that they represent all of composition and literacy, but to create a sample from journals that continuously publish work that writers, editors, and readers find compelling. I acknowledge that this selection process is inevitably somewhat arbitrary, since the articles that are included in the *Best of* issues do not necessarily have anything to do with my focus on oral histories: that is, I am not looking at the titles of articles included in the *Best of* anthologies, but the archives of the journals represented in the annual anthology.

Within this sample, I limit my search from 2016 to the time of writing, 2022, to compensate for the variation of publication longevity and frequency across the three journals. This covers approximately five years of publishing and begins a search at a socio-cultural moment in which democracy, inclusion, and activist writing and speaking are once again particularly relevant. In each

time frame and in each journal, I search for "oral history" and "oral histories," then filter through the results to find only the articles in which oral histories are a significant component of the author's research or teaching (see Appendix B for detailed explanation of these "filters"). From these results, I track the ways in which oral histories are used.

Table 1: Presence of Oral Histories in Articles Published from 2016 to 2022 in Three Literacy Journals.

	Community Literacy Journal, 2016–2022	*Reflections,* 2016–2022	*Literacy in Composition Studies,* 2016–2022	Totals
Articles that significantly use oral histories	1	4	3	8
Existing oral histories are used pedagogically	1	1	0	2
Existing oral histories are used for author's research	0	0	2	2
Existing oral histories are cited as a source	0	0	2	2
New oral histories are created	1	4	1	6
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader	0	0	0	0

This table shows that use of oral histories among published research in composition and literacy studies is rare. The final column in Table 1 shows that most scholars using oral history are doing so by recording new narratives, which occurs in six of the eight articles. By contrast, oral histories are used pedagogically in two of the eight articles and as a source for research in two of the eight. What is perhaps most surprising, given the information provided above about the emphasis in oral history-making as one of public availability, is that of the 6 projects that create new oral histories, none of them tell readers where they might find the full audio files or transcripts of those oral histories. Overall, Table 1 shows a significant preference for creating oral histories over citing them or preserving them.

There are several limitations to my process: including more journals with an expanded period might tell us something else about how scholars in the field use oral history. Further, using keywords to search for "oral history/ies" assumes neat boundaries between oral histories and other forms of interviews, which is not the case in practice. There is a slippage between terms like oral histories, interviews, oral stories, and so many more, with some researchers using the terms interchangeably, and others distinguishing them more deliberately. For example, in "Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning," which is one of the articles

included in the above table under *LiCS,* Douglas Hall and Michael Harker use the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives to explore E'rich Harrington's narrative to study aging and literacy of technology: they also advocate for using the DALN as a source for an "oral history collection" (162). Because they frame the DALN as a source for oral histories, their article appeared in my search. Yet, Harrington's interview is four minutes and 29 seconds long: is this an "oral history" in the sense of the "slow" forms of extended dialogue discussed above, or is it another form of history that is oral?

Other researchers working with the DALN did not show up in my search because they did not frame the resource as a database of oral histories. Alicia McCartney's work with 18 literacy narratives from the DALN explores how previously and currently homeschooled students understand their own literacies. The narratives that she studies are in "a variety of formats: written texts, video and audio interviews, self-recorded video, and audio narratives" (46), but because McCartney does not use the phrase "oral history," her work is not included. Searching with keywords, then, is rarely as straightforward as it appears: I discuss this further in my conclusion.

Alongside these limitations, Table 1 shows that scholars who record oral histories are not making them publicly available (at least not by the time of the publication of the articles that discuss those projects). While the information for best practices on "accession," the process through which a repository gains "custody" of oral history narratives, is readily available on the Oral History Association website, that information also makes it clear that finding a platform for oral histories is no simple task (*Archiving Oral History*). Accession likely requires the time to build relationships with institutions and archivists, filling out more paperwork, and perhaps even financial resources. These barriers to accession could go hand in hand with the low numbers of citations of oral history sources: if researchers in literacy aren't making their oral history projects publicly available, then future literacy scholars won't find and cite those oral histories.[7]

This penchant for creating more so than citing oral sources is not unique to literacy studies. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes argue that oral histories have a "marginal nature," manifesting in "thousands and thousands of tapes lying unused in drawers and archives," though, they note, digitization of oral histories may help with this (vii). Oral historian Michael Frisch describes oral histories as an example of methods showing an "uncritical rush to the supply side, especially given the ease of entry and the assumed demand for its products" (22); the phrase "assumed demand" suggests that the demand is not necessarily active. In 2016, Jessica Wagner Webster explored a similar observation to my own among archiving journals, noting that "archival professional literature is surprisingly sparse in its presentation of oral history case studies" (255), despite evidence that "archivists feel that conducting oral histories is a key part of their work" (259). It is possible, then, that what was once "thousands and thousands of tapes" unused in drawers might now be hundreds of thousands of recordings unopened on websites.[8]

I am not suggesting that researchers withdraw their IRB packages for qualitative interviews and turn en masse to citing oral histories already archived for primary sources; nor am I suggesting that oral historians call off their oral history projects. Rather, I suggest that giving attention to the many oral history projects that do exist in public record could benefit the field. To see more clearly how oral histories are relevant to work that prioritizes the knowledge of underrepresented communities in

literacy studies, in the next section I explore ways in which Jazz's narrative, to take just one example of other relevant published oral histories, could contribute to scholars interested in expanding the scope of ideological models of writing and literacy.

CITING JAZZ'S NARRATIVE IN LITERACY RESEARCH

The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project makes available ten oral histories recorded between May 2012 and May 2014 with students and staff at St. Catherine University. Designed and directed by Louise Edwards-Simpson, who is also the interviewer, the project's stated aim was to "document the intersection of between housing instability and higher education as experienced by members of our Twin Cities campus community" ("SCU Voices"). The stories that Jazz shares respond to Edwards-Simpson's questions about her childhood, experiences with housing security, her journey through education prior to and during her time at St. Kate's, and her future plans (the full list of questions is available online, listed as "Interview Questionnaire"). With these categories of question giving a basic guide to the conversation, Jazz shares some of her memories growing up in Chicago in the 1980s and '90s, moving to Minnesota at the age of fourteen, where she experienced for the first time being surrounded by whiteness (1–2, 4). As a young adult, she entered a non-accredited LPN training program, found employment, and soon purchased her first home. She soon learned, however, that the mortgage she'd been approved for was "predatory," and the rising bills, in addition to being laid off and discovering she was not re-hirable due to her training's lack of accreditation, meant that she faced foreclosure at the age of 21 (7). After a long journey of getting back on her feet, which included finding housing for herself and her two small children, recovering from addiction, and matriculating at St. Kate's to continue her educationall the while enduring stigmatization and racismJazz participates in the oral history project the year that she will graduate. She is one of the few donors who chose to include a photo of herself on the project's landing page: presumably donated after the time of the interview, the photo shows Jazz in full graduation regalia, cheering.

Jazz's narrative could contribute as both a primary source and as contextual evidence to support or complicate findings, or to inform methodology of a variety of research projects. As a primary source, her narrative could be engaged through discourse analysis. The push several decades ago to bring discourse analysis into studies of written texts (Bazerman and Prior; Barton), might now be reversed, or at least returned to, with a responding push for expanding discourse analysis on oral histories. Following Alessandro Portelli's emphasis on the potential for oral history to record "a history of the non-hegemonic classes" based on "the speaker's subjectivity," Jennifer Clary-Lemon suggests that "[i]f researchers connect the value of oral history with the rigor of discourse analysis, it is quite possible to open up an entirely new path to discourse analysis that privileges bottom-up approaches to the benefit of understanding greater complexities of social relations" (21).[9] In her narrative, Jazz enriches what her listeners/readers know about "the complexities of social relations" in several ways. Early on in the recording, Edwards-Simpson asks if Jazz's living situation as a young girl was a "secure housing situation." Jazz answers:

> Now that is debatable. I'm not sure if our housing was unstable or if my mother just liked to

move. I know that as a child, we moved frequently [. . .] I always noticed that we always lived somewhere cozy. If our living situations were unstable I was unaware of that. But they could have very well have been because we moved so frequently" (2:30–3:07, my emphasis).[10]

The words I embolden, "debatable," various "if"s, and the phrase "could very well have been," all suggest movement in Jazz's reflection on this period of her life. They also show how her memories resist imposed labels from her adult self (and her interviewer), as she considers "lik[ing] to move" and "somewhere cozy" alongside "unstable." These conditional words and phrases could contribute to a study on memories of precarity, verbal protection of vulnerability, or methods of narrative agency.

Jazz's oral history might also contribute to studies on oral rhetorical strategies, since the audio file is publicly available, allowing researchers to study sound elements in her narration. For example, the speed with which a narrator speaks can provide information about a story or memory: "dwelling on an episode," Alessandro Portelli writes, "may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy to distract attentions from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator" (66). Or, a study might consider how laughter is used in oral narratives. Jazz often laughs after sharing a hardship, including when she realizes how "I skipped the whole homeless part!" (16:35), and after a description of her time living in a one-bedroom apartment with her two children that closes with the phrase, "we lived in that apartment for a long time" (19:30). Her laughter after descriptions of situations that are not literally funny is a form of rhetorical positioning that informs understandings of how she looks back on those moments.[11]

These examples might be used as primary sources for studies on narrating precarity, oral rhetorical strategies, and narrative agency; other parts of Jazz's narrative might contribute to the research required to conduct new oral histories and/or qualitative interviews. As contextualizing evidence, oral histories might inform methodology, context on particular topics, or complicate findings in concluding remarks. For example, oral histories could contribute to "triangulation" methods in qualitative studies, a practice that Merriam and Grenier explain as using multiple sources of information so that "what someone tells you in an interview can be checked" with information from other sources (26). Or, researchers developing an interview protocol might use Jazz's narrative during their design, thanks to Edwards-Simpson's final question, which asks what other questions Jazz would ask, were she conducting the interview. Jazz's answer prompts the following exchange:

> *"Her laughter after descriptions of situations that are not literally funny is a form of rhetorical positioning that informs understandings of how she looks back on those moments."*

J - I would ask questions about marital status and sexual orientation.

L - Ok. Would you care to answer those questions?

J - I identify as non-heterosexual. I don't know, I'm just difficult, not bisexual or anything like that just non-heterosexual. I'm also single and never married but as an orientation leader in the past and particularly transfer orientation, I hear a lot of women say I'm back

in school because my husband blank... my husband left me, my husband died, my husband is sick and can't work anymore.

L - Lost his job, in jail.

J - Wherever and it's like my husband blank. Sometimes some people story is my husband blank but that's not my story. (1:09:27–1:10:10)

Future interviewers interested in narratives about education experiences might take note of Jazz's suggestions and cite her ideas as a source in their own research. In the above excerpt, Jazz's self-identification as a "non-heterosexual" might inform scholars thinking about how to ask participants of a study about their sexuality. Further, Jazz's exploration of her own identity and how it marginalizes her from academic and non-academic environments could inform researchers studying marginalized identities in multiple environments. Her observations of how gendered sexuality impacts women's simultaneous experiences of education and poverty could be engaged by scholars who are exploring literacy in contexts of LGBTQIA communities and/or low-income environments. Just as we would not pursue written academic inquiry without citing other scholars, why should we not also cite oral sources that inform the methods we use to conduct oral interviews?

As a final example for how Jazz's narrative might contribute to literacy scholarship, I cite an anecdote that Jazz shares regarding her experiences with racism throughout her education. I cite the exchange at length to make visible the range of topics that she brings up:

J - So class hasn't began yet and me and my classmate I'm sitting next to, we're talking about the inflation in tuition here and we're like "Ah you know, it's already expensive enough and then they're raising it $40 more," and so my classmate in front of me turns around and she's like "Why do you even care how expensive tuition is?" I didn't even understand what she was saying... like why wouldn't I care about tuition if I have to pay it. She was like "Oh, you pay tuition?" And I said "Yeah, why wouldn't I pay tuition?" "Oh 'cause you know, what I thought all black people got the United Negro College Fund."

L - Oh my gosh!

J - And she was dead serious.

. . .

J - So I'm stunned.

L - What did you think about that?

J - I was like "Well you obviously don't know much about the United Negro College Fund because in order to be eligible for the United Negro College Fund, you have to go to a historically black college, St. Kate's is not that so I'm [not] getting the United Negro College Fund. Secondly the United Negro College Fund gives you $10,000 a year."

L - That's it?

J - "Even if I was getting the United Negro College Fund, which I'm not because [SCU] is predominantly white, I would still be worried about tuition. So before you make assumptions like that and make statements like that, you should know the facts behind what you were saying." (56:30–58:50).

Jazz's experience with racism at her university emphasizes assumptions made by her peers, and likely

other students at other universities, as well as of a faculty member (i.e., the interviewer's question "That's it?"). Further, the oral modes of this telling show rhetorical strategies. Her use of "secondly" and "Even if . . . which I'm not," with a concluding "So before you make assumptions" employs oral strategies of persuasion that researchers might explore in ideological literacy contexts. This section of Jazz's narrative, and others, might offer valuable context to scholars working with storytelling about racism, peer-to-peer interactions in undergraduate environments, and the spread of misinformation among student communities. Jazz's oral history, along with the nine other conversations recorded for the SCU project, help literacy scholars understand how students construct their narratives of precarity, and how navigating and surviving that precarity shapes their oral and written literacy praxis.

KEYWORDS AND CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I explore one more barrier to citing oral histories: the same "slowness" that Sheftel and Zembrzycki position as a benefit of oral history making (see above) also asks more of researchers. While studying the aural information in oral history audio files, such as the use of pausing, sarcasm, or tone, is compelling and vital to literacy work, we might spend hours listening to a narrative and decide it is not directly relevant to our focus. There is, as of yet, no "control-f" search function for audio files. Citing oral histories, then, could mean adding hours to a research time slot that, for most academics, is already limited.

Even before listening to files, however, a researcher's likelihood of engaging with one audio file over another is largely based on keywords, the primary gatekeepers of research. In the inaugural issue of *LiCS*, Brenda Glascott positions her exploration of how "literacy" and "rhetoric" function as keywords as part of a broader discussion about research over time. She writes that "history is summoned by the present and circumscribed by the language we use in the summoning. Historians and archivists work with partial vision: our keywords, key questions, key interests point our gaze in certain directions

"The researcher who compiles and labels an oral history into a particular collection anticipates who might engage with that narrative."

and there is little assurance we are not missing important elements just beyond our peripheral vision" (18). Applying this to citing oral histories, the keywords that introduce an oral history to potential researchers also inherently interpret the narrative. The researcher who compiles and labels an oral history into a particular collection anticipates who might engage with that narrative.

These keywords exist for good reason: we probably have keywords to thank for anyone citing an existing oral history at all. As someone studying the oral history narratives of people experiencing homelessness, it was the title of the oral history project ("SCU Voices of Homelessness") and the key words for Jazz's narrative ("Housing insecurity, frequent moves, food insecurity, intergenerational poverty, single parent") that signaled that her narrative would be important for me to hear. However, as I continued to work with the file, I became interested in other aspects of her narrative, including but not limited to the content that I cite above. The complexity of her narrative could be described by

alternative sets of keywords, including the following:

> *First generation homeowner; first generation college student; predatory lending; non-accredited education programs; debt*

or

> *Racist peers; obstruction to education; non-transferrable credits; non-traditional college student; students teaching peers*

or

> *Power dynamics in interviews; resilience against systems; laughter as rhetoric; sarcasm as resilience; confidence as composition*

Any of these sets of keywords would have made me less likely to open the files as part of my work on homelessness, as they would more effectively draw in scholars studying education narratives or resilience in marginalized students. While sets of keywords do not literally obstruct entrance to a particular narrative, they are a researcher's initial encounter with a source, an encounter that likely determines whether they select one file over so many others. Further, because oral histories often come as part of a larger project, any keywords describing the narrative are likely to emphasize that narrative's relevance to the archive to which it belongs.

Oral historians are in the throes of these questions, debating the consequences and potentials of how digitization, the internet, and technology affect oral history-making and disseminating. Tools such as the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), which allows researchers to index and synchronize audio files with transcripts to "enhance search and discovery of information in online audio and video" (OHMS 3), effectively makes oral histories more searchable, taking some of the burden off of the limitation of keywords: yet each index created is a framing. Sheftel and Zembrzycki identify some of the tensions between technologies such as the OHMS, which have the potential to "create the conditions for an equitable, engaged, and collaborative research model" (96), while at the same time taking away from the "slowness" that makes oral histories so important. They write,

> Indexing implies that we are listening principally for information rather than for the more subjective elements of an interview and, beyond that, the meaning they contain. How does one index a silence? . . . is there a way to index the interpersonal dynamics of the reciprocal oral history process—the conflicts, difficult moments, inequalities, and political differences that we noted earlier? People's life stories are complex, intertwined, and often nonlinear, and what they tell us depends on the kinds of relationships we form with them. (103)

Scholars in literacy might engage with oral histories for both purposes that Sheftel and Zembrzycki summarize. We might word-search indexed transcripts for words like "letters," "message," or "feedback," but we might also listen to an entire narrative, noting pauses, tones, and power dynamics in dialogue.

If our searches rely on keywords, and if we as academics are the creators of keywords, then perhaps we can both create keywords and engage with them more deliberately. Matthew Overstreet's exploration of digital media literacy helps to frame how scholars might include oral histories and other forms of oral knowledge into our work. He writes that "When we engage the world through digital media, our tools shape our perception, thought and action. But tools never act alone" (48).

Because scholars interested in writing and literacy are, "most of us anyway, humanists," he argues, "we best engage these technologies not on the level of code or circuitry, but on the level of human thought and behavior. How do our tools shape how we think, write, read, and relate? How can we design better patterns of engagement?" (62). Or, as Amy Wan says, "It's important to do the work in terms of our own research design, and this includes considering what is missing and why that's the case, creating spaces and opportunities to amplify voices" (118). What I hope that I have suggested here is that, in order to ask *how* we might cite oral histories, and what kind of work is required for doing so, we might first consider *that* we cite them.

At the end of Jazz's narrative, the interviewer asks if Jazz would like to add anything else before they close. Jazz responds: "I guess one last thing I should say is that to people with housing insecurity just know that it's going to get better and it might not get better on your time but it will be the right time when it happens" (1:11:30). Edwards-Simpson's invitation for Jazz to fill in what a researcher might have missed makes it possible for Jazz to summon a non-academic audience. Jazz applies her literacy for navigating homelessness simultaneously with education systems to the imagined community of listeners who might be searching for stories not so much to cite, but to use as guides. It is Jazz, not the researcher, who sees the relevance of her narrative to other people who have experienced homelessness and education obstacles; it is Jazz, and not the researcher, who knows the value of an underrepresented narrative to communities crafting underrepresented narratives of their own.

Appendix A: Journals Represented
in the *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition*
from the Last Five Years (2015-2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Numbers in parenthesis indicate repeat appearances.

Across the Disciplines (2)

Basic Writing eJournal

College Composition and Communication (3)

Community Literacy Journal (5)

Composition Forum (2)

Composition Studies (4)

Enculturation (3)

Harlot (2)

Journal of Basic Writing (2)

The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics

Journal of Second Language Writing (3)

Journal of Teaching Writing (3)

KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society

Literacy in Composition Studies (5)

Pedagogy

Philosophy and Rhetoric

Present Tense (3)

Reflections (5)

Research in the Teaching of English

Rhetoric of Health & Medicine

Rhetoric Review (2)

Rhetoric Society Quarterly (2)

Teaching English in the Two-Year College (2)

Technical Communication Quarterly

WAC Journal (2)

WLN Journal of Writing Center Scholarship (4)

WPA (2)

Writing Center Journal

Writing on the Edge

Appendix B: Explanation of Process
and Annotated Bibliography of Relevant Sources

Community Literacy Journal

Process and Results

Using the site's search engine, I searched for "oral history" and "oral histories," limiting results to the last five years and to scholarly articles. This generated one article:

> Trimble, Thomas, Patricia Baldwin, Mansoor Mubeen, and Christine Lawson. "The 1967 Project" (*CLJ*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	Yes
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

This article discusses how undergraduates recorded oral history narratives with "older adults" who experienced the violence of the Detroit Rebellion in the summer of 1967. As part of their preparation for recording interviews, students "listened to some of the oral histories cataloged on the website Detroit1967.org" (159). After the interviews, students used data from the recordings and other archival material to "write a research-based essay" (154). The article does not say whether these interviews are available to the public. Oral histories are not cited explicitly (though within the article the author provides the Detroit1967.org website, which directs readers to a collection of oral history narratives, among other material).

Reflections

The archive search function on this site does not allow filtering by date. I searched "oral histor," to account for both "oral history" and "oral histories." which generates nine results. I then filtered these results to locate only those articles that use oral histories as a method in the research. Two articles were outside of my time range: Susie Lan Cassel's "A Hunger for Memory: Oral History Recovery in Community-Service Learning" (2000), and Lisa Roy-Davis's review of "*Conquistadora* by Esmeralda Santiago (2013). Two of the remaining seven sources use "oral histor" as a peripheral mention that is not a significant part of the study's methods: "Community Literacy as Justice Entrepreneurship: Envisioning the Progressive Potential of Entrepreneurship in a Post-Covid Field (vol. 21, no. 1, 2022) and "ISU Quarantine Journal Project: Reflective Writing, Public Memory, and Community Building in Extraordinary Times" (vol. 21, no. 1, 2022)). Of the remaining five results, one is a list of "publications" simply listing the titles of articles.

This leaves four articles that employ oral histories.[12]

> 1) "Cultivating Empathy on the Eve of the Pandemic" by Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Tamara Dean, Rachel Alsbury, Julia Buskirk, Margot Higgins, Eloise Johnson, Sharon Koretskov, Brad Steinmetz, Emma Waldinger, Samuel Wood, and Carl Zuleger.(*CLJ*, vol. 21,

no. 1, 2022).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	Yes
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

This article describes how an undergraduate course pivoted during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, students recorded oral histories to contribute to a local archive of flood narratives. No longer able to do so during the pandemic, the next cohort engaged with the archive by listening to existing narratives and participating in "quality control [of] transcripts of oral histories" gathered earlier (np). Narratives from the flood archive are not cited, nor does the article direct the reader where to go to access the oral histories (though they can be found through a google search, by which I found this link: https://www.wisconsinfloodstories.org/).

2) "If We Knew Our History: Building on the Insights of Past Prison Teachers" by Laura Rogers (CLJ, vol. 19, no. 1, 2019).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Rogers records six oral history interviews with "teachers who taught in various carceral sites during the 1970s and early 1980s" (215). Rogers concludes that "The oral histories attest to the multiple and complex reasons these teachers had for teaching in challenging and even dangerous situations" (226). Rogers does not cite other oral histories or tell readers where to access those that she collected.

3) "Counternarratives: Community Writing and Anti-Racist Rhetoric" by Laurie Grobman, Elizabeth Kemmerer, and Meghan Zebertavage. (CLJ, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Students, community members, and the author collaborated to record 22 oral history interviews with African Americans who lived in Reading, Pennsylvania during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. While students read about oral history making, they did not read existing oral histories as part of their preparation (50–51). The recorded interviews contribute to a manuscript that was printed into 250 copies, made available online, and preserved in a museum (45). I select "NO" for

whether the oral histories are accessible to the reader because they contribute to the manuscript but do not seem to be available in full interview form.

4) "Listening to Ferguson Voices, Finding the Courage to Resist" by Joel R. Pruce (CLJ Special Winter Issue, 2017–2018).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Undergraduate students and "practitioner partners" recorded oral history interviews with "people who witnessed and shaped the uprising following the shooting death of Michael Brown" (57–58). After collecting the videos, the team shared the stories in a "storytelling website" and "limited series podcast" (68). While these modes are accessible, they lead to short excerpts each running a few minutes long, and they do not include the questions of the interviewer.

Literacy in Composition Studies

Process and Results

Using the journal's search engine, I searched for articles with "oral history" and "oral histories" published after 2015, which yielded eight results. Among the eight are two editors' introductions that reference scholars' work in the issue using oral histories (special issue introduction to vol. 6, no. 2 by Lauren Marshall Bowen, and general editors' introduction to vol. 4, no. 1). Among the remaining six are three peripheral references of these search terms: Steve Parks' "'I Hear Its Chirping Coming From My Throat': Activism, Archives, and the Long Road Ahead"; Michael Blancato, Gavin P. Johnson, Beverly J. Moss, and Sara Wilder's "Brokering Community-Engaged Writing Pedagogies: Instructors Imagining and Negotiating Race, Space, and Literacy"; and Kaia Simon's "Daughters Learning from Fathers: Migrant Family Literacies that Mediate Borders" (vol 5, no. 1), in which the term "oral history" appears in a statement made by one of the participants in the research, but the research itself uses "semi-structured oral literacy history," approved by a IRB.

This leaves three articles in the time range that employ oral histories.

1) "Beyond Basic Reading and Writing: The People's House and the Political Literacy Education of the Student-Activists of the Black Liberation Front International, 1968-1975" by Joy Karega (*LiCS,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2016).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Joy Karega conducts two oral history interviews with members of the Black Liberation Front International (BLFI) (28). After initial oral history interviews, through which she asked

"open-ended questions about the BLFI's political activism and the reading and writing practices that supported this activism," she conducted follow-up interviews with tiered questions informed by the first interviews (25). Karega adds her own oral histories by speakers' names to her Works Cited section; however, the format of these citations do not direct researchers to where they might find the source, e.g. "Boone, Ernie. Oral History Interview. 2 Sept. 2012.") After reading this article, readers do not know how to access these interviews.

2) "Lifeworld Discourse, Translingualism, and Agency in a Discourse Genealogy of César Chávez's Literacies" by Clay Walker (LiCS, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	Yes
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	Yes
New oral histories are created:	No
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Clay Walker uses a published compilation of oral history interviews to explore the "lifeworld discourse" of César Chávez (24). Walker explains that these interviews were conducted by Jacques Levy during the early 1970s: "Levy acts as an archivist assembling transcriptions of Chávez's oral interviews, which were selected and compiled by Levy into book form, but without any editorial narrative synthesizing or otherwise commenting on Chávez's recollections" (25). This compiled book is included in Walker's citations. While this might be a stretch to include this as a citation of an oral history, as it is unclear if Levy left entire transcripts of each "selection" or if interviews are excerpted, I follow the author's designation that they are oral histories.

3) "Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning" by Douglas Hall and Michael Harker (*LiCS,* vol. 6, no. 2, 2018).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	Yes
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	Yes
New oral histories are created:	No
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Douglas Hall and Michael Harker use the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives to study the video literacy narrative of E'rich Harrington, in which he explains his experiences with technology as an older person. The authors focus on DALN as "a site for composition scholars to mine attitudes and conceptions of aging and literacy" (158). They also propose how their work can be activated in classroom settings through what they call an "oral history collection event that employs the DALN" (162). This "event" includes learning from the DALN and recording new interviews to contribute to its collection; this is a "proposed pedagogical approach" (162) and not a summary of what students have done in their classrooms (hence the "NO" answers to the pedagogical question in the chart).

NOTES

[1] Though in this article I focus on using oral histories in research, using oral histories in classrooms is also an important part of scholarly inclusion through citation. For example, oral histories can support teaching that challenges the continued hierarchy of "essayist literacy" (see Marcia Farr) in writing classrooms.

[2] I make this observation with no amount of self-righteousness: while I have recorded oral histories and conducted interviews, I have never cited an oral history prior to this article.

[3] Michael Frisch writes that oral history is unique because its "documents [. . . are] explicit dialogues about memory" (22); Janesick describes the method as one in which "participants are focusing on key issues of the past and the present and freely communicate their thoughts through a give-and-take, so to speak, of responses and questions" (46); and Daniel Kerr argues that "More central to our [oral historians'] practice than our production of recordings, transcripts, collections, articles, and monographs, is the fact that we facilitate dialogues grounded in personal experiences and interpretive reflections on the past" (371).

[4] Oral historians have a decades-long relationship with IRB committees that oral historians describe as "contentious" (Smith 140), a "controversy" (Janesick 54), and based on "proscriptions [that] make little sense to oral historians" (Shopes, "Oral History"). IRB requirements to preserve privacy of interviewees are antithetical to the goals of oral histories: in stronger terms, Shopes explains that these requirements "violate[s] a fundamental principle of oral history," which is that they be made publicly available (np). In 2019, the tension in this relationship was somewhat relieved when federal IRB requirements considered exempt those oral history projects that cannot be classified by a specific definition of "research" (Information about IRBs). However, this exemption continues to operate in a gray area. Depending on how oral historians frame their project, who sits on the IRB committee, and the event or theme around which stories are collected, a collective oral history project could be considered "research."

[5] The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project, which was published in 2012, did undergo a full IRB process (Edwards-Simpson). It is likely that were the project initiated today, it would be considered exempt.

[6] There is room for further exploration of the tensions between privacy and attribution in oral history making. For example, my citation for Jazz's oral history is titled "Jazz" yet is accompanied by the researcher's entire name: we could, then, find out more about the researcher but not about the narrator. This puts researchers citing Jazz's narrative, such as myself, in the position of working with an individual's story as a source that is somewhat separate from the individual—though it is much closer than the information that is possible via other methods.

[7] There are, however, several databases where researchers can find oral history collections. Larger collections with helpful search functions include the Oral History Archives at Columbia and the "Centers and Collections" resource webpage of the Oral History Association.

[8] Allison Mills shows how the digitization of oral sources can be an act of colonialism when it is not undertaken in partnership with communities from whom those sources originate. For example,

"ethnographic field recordings" conducted by researchers in indigenous communities decades ago that may now be "vulnerable to degradation," and thus considered for digitization, may "never have been intended by their teller to reach beyond a certain audience" (111). I explore this tension by considering the practice of citing oral histories that have been donated by narrators with full consent for public use.

[9] It is possible that Clary-Lemon anticipates a developing energy in the field: a recent dissertation by Sean Moxley-Kelly uses narrative analysis on select oral histories from the Society of Women Engineers oral history project to "to reveal the claims participants make through stories, themes that are evident across those claims, and how women engineers effectively use stories to advance those claims" (i).

[10] To emphasize the value of citing oral sources, I reference time stamps from the audio file of Jazz's narrative rather than the written transcript.

[11] While I do not explore the importance of listening to oral sources, in addition to or perhaps in place of reading transcripts, in this article, I can note that scholars using both qualitative interview and oral history methods consider this an important distinction. For example, Potter and Hepburn write of qualitative interviews that "The provision of audio and video materials would help address a further problem with the representation of interview material, which is that the transcript may be faulty" (561). Similarly, Portelli laments the frequency with which oral histories are transcribed and how often "it is only transcripts that are published" (64).

[12] Editorial footnote: We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to this text: Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Tamara Dean, Rachel Alsbury, Julia Buskirk, Margot Higgins, Eloise Johnson, Sharon Koretskov, Brad Steinmetz, Emma Waldinger, Samuel Wood and Carl Zuleger. It is LiCS' editorial policy to name all authors of a text instead of using "et al." We do this because "et al." can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.

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Book Review   *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition* by Erec Smith

Joshua Barnes   Indiana University of Pennsylvania

How can it be possible for disempowerment to be mistaken for empowerment? Isn't the dichotomy between the two abundantly clear? Erec Smith thinks not. Smith's ethos as a Black professor of rhetoric and composition places him in a unique position to critique anti-racist pedagogy. It is not his perspective that racism is not present in the academy: far from it. He has been the recipient of prejudice and discrimination from his graduate work all the way to his teaching. In his book, Smith includes personal experiences and anecdotes that help to illustrate his perspective. As a Black rhetoric and composition instructor in the majority White institution of York College of Pennsylvania, Smith has experienced these issues firsthand and has found that anti-racist pedagogy alone, which he argues can lead to a lack of academic rigor, is not necessarily the appropriate answer.

Smith's main argument is that anti-racist pedagogy in rhetoric and composition often inadvertently disempowers students by ignoring important aspects of empowerment theory. This pedagogy instead encourages marginalized students to embrace their positionalities as the center of all arguments and to fall back into positions of victimhood. Smith explains that this "victim framing" creates "disempowered entities in need of enlightenment instead of empowered agents with self-efficacy and a desire to broaden the interactional and behavioral components of empowerment" (88). This victimhood allows students to escape from proper academic scrutiny which, in turn, reduces academic rigor.

In his introduction, Smith begins his critique with a vignette in which W. E. B. Du Bois recounts an experience in a composition class at Harvard. In his first essay for that class, Du Bois had railed against racist issues present in society at the time and had let fly his own colloquial grammar and syntax. This first effort was met with a failing grade. From this experience, Du Bois noted, "[he] realized that while style is subordinate to content, and that no real literature can be composed simply of meticulous and fastidious phrases, nevertheless solid content with literary style carries a message further than poor grammar and muddled syntax" (Smith xix). Du Bois realized it was imperative to adapt to "standard English," or what Smith prefers to call the "language of wider communication" (LWC) (5), rather than insist on communicating in the vernacular he grew up speaking. Using Du Bois as an example of code switching, Smith addresses the present climate of code meshing taught in many quarters of the rhetoric and composition field. According to scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Asao Inoue, and others, rhetoric and composition instructors who require their students of color to adapt to the LWC engage in a form of racism because this adaptation automatically alienates students' home dialects. As such, they propose that students in rhetoric and composition should be encouraged to inject their writing with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as well as other dialect forms. In writing and speaking this way, anti-racist scholars argue, students embrace

their identities as students of color and feel a sense of empowerment. Their home dialects are no longer "othered," and they are encouraged to express themselves as they are comfortable.

Taking aim at anti-racist pedagogy in the field of rhetoric and composition, Smith begs to differ. Smith describes how anti-racist pedagogues encourage "the primacy of identity," which he notes is "the recognition and expression of identity takes precedence over other considerations and is almost immune to critique" (3). This primacy of identity, coupled with prefigurative politics, leads to a "narrative of victimhood" (18). As a result of this victim narrative, students are encouraged to code mesh. Any and all critique of this code meshing from an academic and rhetorical theory perspective is discouraged. This is where Smith takes issue, since the nature of all academic discourse is the ability to think critically and ask questions. Smith argues true empowerment comes from scholars standing up under close academic scrutiny. If this scrutiny is absent, is this truly empowerment?

Smith goes on in subsequent chapters to explore empowerment theory. He cites a wide variety of scholars and discusses their definitions of empowerment, among them psychologist Marc Zimmerman, who noted empowerment is established by three factors coming to fruition in people: the intrapersonal, the interactional, and the behavioral. These factors coupled with agency are essential for people, in this case young college writers, to feel truly empowered. Smith argues that anti-racist work in rhetoric and composition stems from a feeling of not being able to make meaningful change and therefore falls back on "performative change or the silencing of supposed dissenters while having no real plan for social or institutional progress" (29). He quotes activist Bob Wing, who was writing about other activists who stop short of real change: "If winning feels impossible, then righteousness can seem like the next best thing" (29). It is this sense of victimization that Smith takes issue with, as it will not allow true academic scrutiny. To question the sacred victim is to tread on the holy and therefore is inappropriate.

Smith argues that this victimization, in the sense Wing describes, is not true academic discourse. On the contrary, through the proper use of empowerment theory, marginalized students can be encouraged to escape from the semblance of empowerment offered by the role of sacred victimhood espoused by the anti-racist pedagogues. Following the example set by Du Bois in the introduction, students can be empowered by infusing anti-racist pedagogy with empowerment theory to produce more rigorous academic discourse in the field of rhetoric. Smith does not for an instant argue an absence of racism in academia, or in the modern world for that matter. He simply takes issue with the weakening of academic discourse in rhetoric and composition brought on by the preponderance of the primacy of identity coupled with the sacred victim narrative added to prefigurative politics. The empowerment promised here, Smith argues, is actually and unintentionally disempowerment, or what he refers to as "trickster racism" (95).

Through Smith's explanation of anti-racist pedagogy and true empowerment, it is easy to see how disempowerment and empowerment can be mixed up. Teachers at all levels have to be continuously engaged in the process of self-reflection. We encourage it in our students, and we must demand it of ourselves. This is a powerful, thought-provoking book, and it should be read by any and all teachers of rhetoric and composition. Smith has thoroughly researched the topic and calls upon his vast experience to speak into the topic. Instead of falling back into the victim narrative, rhetors

need to consider the *kairos*—the fundamental question of time, place, audience, and subject—to communicate effectively. This is true for all writers and speakers, regardless of their status. Hearkening back to W. E. B. Du Bois and his pragmatic approach in the introduction, Smith notes how effective DuBois was in recognizing rhetorical situations and adapting his communication style to them. This is the heart of academic writing and the process all academic writers ought to embrace.

A Critique is a bold book, considering the day and age in which Smith is writing. Some could hear a different message than he intended. However, Smith is uniquely positioned to critique anti-racist pedagogy as a Black pedagogue himself. He does not shy away from "speaking truth to power" or, as a colleague referred to him, "dealing swords" (viii). Readers of the book will appreciate his boldness. Smith builds his argument logically by laying the groundwork of prefigurative politics and primacy of identity present in anti-racist pedagogy at the beginning. He then explores empowerment theory to arrive at the argument that anti-racist pedagogy in rhetoric and composition does not accomplish the goal of empowerment. He suggests fostering students' agency by using project-based learning to allow for truer empowerment. Smith's unity and coherence are very strong; he has clearly read far and wide, and he has incorporated his sources quite effectively.

However, this is not an easy book to read. On one level, Smith's tone is conversational, but his language and syntax are deeply academic and can be challenging for readers, who may struggle unless they are very familiar with the topics being discussed. Smith also deals with questions of race and language that may cause some readers to squirm, but this discomfort is exactly the place where those readers should grow. A final drawback to the book is that it is limited to the world of rhetoric and composition and must be read as such. It would be very enlightening to expand it further beyond the field, but this was not Dr. Smith's intention. This book will inspire readers to examine their own views of how to teach rhetoric and composition.

Speaking for myself, a White, middle-aged teacher of rhetoric and composition, I found this to be a very eye-opening and challenging book. It was eye-opening because Smith addressed pedagogy that I was not altogether familiar with in ways I had not considered. Smith challenged me to wrestle with very large ideas and sent me scurrying to read many other authors to address my knowledge gap. For me, this was a fortunate byproduct of the book. As with all good books, I am not the same person having read it as I was when I first started. In many ways, I recognize that while trying to overcome my position in the hegemony and to confront anti-Black racism, I have inadvertently added to the problem. This book has challenged me to think through how to maintain academic rigor as well as to empower all my students. I highly recommend it to instructors on all levels.

Works Cited

Smith, Erec. *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*. Lexington Books, 2020.

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