

LiCS

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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. We want to retain Composition's complicated history as well as FYC's institutional location and articulation to secondary education. 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. We are committed to publishing scholarship that explores literacy at its intersection with Composition's history, pedagogies, and interdisciplinary methods of inquiry.

Literacy is a 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.

LiCS seeks submissions that interpret literacy at a time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation. We are open to a wide range of research that takes up these issues, and 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 whereby literacies are valued or legitimated
- 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

We are really excited to share this issue that explores diversity, inclusion, and difference in rich ways, from an analysis of how current translanguaging theory is an insufficient response to monolingual attitudes toward language, to case studies of the literacy practices of African American participants in coding bootcamps, to the literacy practice of reading and throwing “shade” embodied by the literacy narratives of Black queer attendees of Black Gay Pride DC. After previewing the important pieces in this issue, we close by updating readers about ways that issues of diversity and inclusion have played out on a systemic level in terms of our own academic publishing practices. Specifically, we outline efforts we have undertaken to practice anti-racist principles in publishing *LiCS*. Finally, with this issue, we would like to recognize and welcome Helen Sandoval as our newly appointed Book Review Editor (she previously served as Assistant Editor) and to thank our outgoing Book Review Editor, Iris Ruiz, for her skillful leadership.

Bruce Horner and Sara P. Alvarez's “Defining Translinguality” is a theoretical exploration of responses and “confusions” attendant to the “epistemological break” signaled by the concept of translanguaging. By carefully delineating the meanings that have accrued to the term “translinguality” and other terms frequently associated or substituted for it, such as “plurilinguality,” “code-meshing,” and “translanguaging,” Horner and Alvarez offer a compelling argument that these concepts continue—ironically—to reinforce a monolingualist paradigm. This is accomplished by forefronting the “ideal of clear and untroubled communication” (with “code-switching/meshing and translanguaging” as “a means of achieving that ideal”) and by “reinforcing the reification of language practices in readily identifiable and discrete ‘codes’ available for mixing or meshing.” They argue that translanguaging, as they define it, is the concept most able to be used to circumvent this monolingualist paradigm “in terms of language ontology, language user agency, and the kinds of social relations advanced.” For Horner and Alvarez, “a translanguaging orientation” can act as the “concrete labor in sustaining and revising language, and hence can redefine the social relations between and among language users and language.” Ultimately, they conclude that, “[B]y recognizing the role of language users’ concrete labor in sustaining and revising language, a translanguaging orientation acknowledges opacity and friction as normal components of social interactions rather than as problems to be eradicated or condemned.”

In “Between Learning and Opportunity: A Study of African American Coders’ Networks of Support,” Antonio Byrd contributes to recent conversations about coding literacy, writing ecologies, and critical race theory by examining the material conditions that shape learning in a code bootcamp designed for low-income adults. Drawing on ego network analysis and prior scholarship asking writers to map their literacy practices, Byrd asks participants to draw maps of support—“the people and objects in their lives that helped them keep learning coding literacy despite racial disparities”—and interviews each participant about the details provided in their maps. From this data, Byrd finds that participants develop processes and “gather resources that help them access coding literacy as a resistant response to inequality in their lives.” Byrd’s research, and the three case studies he presents in his article, opens a path for future research on literacy across the lifespan and provides a deeper understanding of how white supremacist ideology surfaces in and impacts literacy policy

development and learning.

In “Shade: Literacy Narratives at Black Gay Pride,” Seth Davis suggests that shade, the complex practice of delivering or reading subtle insults as a part of conversation among Black queer people, is a situated “fierce literacy” practice, a type of engagement that involves “riff[ing] off static ideas of language and literacy both to communicate with and to create community amongst friends.” Building on the work of Eric Darnell Pritchard, who argues for “definitions of literacy [to be] complicated, rhetorical, and embodied,” Davis shares and discusses a set of video interviews he conducted at the Washington DC Black Gay Pride festival. His subjects offer varying nuanced definitions of shade, noting its verbal and nonverbal dimensions and suggesting that reading shade and throwing shade are moves by which Black queer people not only reinforce their relationships with one another but also “have figured out ways to maintain, mix, and mesh . . . in order to survive in hostile spaces.” Davis concludes that shade “is a literacy of kinship and survival” that has roots in Black oral traditions as well as in queer cultural practices, calling for more attention to be paid to literacy practices in Black queer friendship groups, in part to complicate and extend our understanding of fierce literacy practices.

The book reviews in this issue exemplify a range of relevant and timely scholarship in composition studies. These reviews attempt to extend our understanding of important concerns in today’s world—concerns that reflect both historical and modern significance. First, Elisa Findlay reviews Evan Watkins’s *Literacy Work in the Reign of Human Capital*. Noting that this “work aligns with other literacy studies scholarship concerned with the role and value of literacy skills in our modern economy,” Findlay provides helpful and necessary context for understanding why Watkins’s book is an important addition to past and current scholarship in the field. Furthermore, she suggests that “Watkins’s extensive and interdisciplinary synthesis of scholarship . . . provides a useful starting point for researchers” in the field.

In his review of Candace Epps-Robertson’s *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia*, Ryan Skinnell provides a critical look into this timely contribution to the field. He notes that Epps-Robertson “invites [us] to think carefully about how education, literacy, and citizenship are connected to social and racial justice, freedom and critical engagement, as well as to systemic oppression, racism, and injustice.” Ultimately, Skinnell highlights the historical and cultural significance of Epps-Robertson’s work, situating it in the context of today’s American education system, and specifically in literacy education.

With this issue, we would like to report on the efforts *LiCS* has undertaken to renew and deepen our commitment to anti-racist publishing practices. Three scholars in particular have helped shape our thinking, and we are grateful to them for their efforts and generosity: Carmen Kynard, Eric Darnell Pritchard, and Iris Ruiz. The founding editors wanted to build a journal ethos that opened new space for inquiry and exchange and for emerging and underrepresented voices. We decided our editing philosophy would be grounded in mentorship and transparency. Essentially, we wanted

to create the humane publishing experience we ourselves wished to experience as writers. We have been trying to enact the values we hold, with varying degrees of success and failure. Below are the activities we've undertaken.

1. **Diversifying the Journal's Editors and Editorial Board.** Prompted by Carmen Kynard's "Teaching While Black: Witnessing Disciplinary Whiteness, Racial Violence, and Race-Management" (*LiCS* 7.1), in February 2018 we conducted a demographic survey of our editors, reviewers, and editorial board, which helped us identify the need to diversify our editorial board and editorial team. We created and implemented a procedure to stagger terms of editorial board members and recruit new board members; the new board was finalized in January 2019, with additional updates made in June 2019.

In fall 2018, we developed a plan to replace the current six-person Editorial Team. This November we implemented the plan by issuing a call for individuals and teams of editors to rotate into *LiCS* leadership. The application, available on our [announcements page](#), specifically asks applicants to demonstrate their commitment to anti-racist work in their institutions, their communities, and/or their published scholarship.

In 2017-2018, we created book review editor positions to ameliorate the haphazard way we were publishing book reviews and to further diversify participation in the journal's leadership. Prior to these positions, most of the books that were reviewed were those for which we received unsolicited manuscripts. We intentionally prioritized publicizing the call for the book review editor positions among networks for scholars of color.

2. **Revising Our Review Processes.** In response to the important conversations on the WPA listserv and elsewhere about citation politics, we drafted a statement November 2018 requesting potential authors to consult and cite relevant work by underrepresented scholars; we reached out to the SIGs and CCCC Caucuses to share the draft statement and request bibliographies to post in support of potential authors in December 2018. Our former book editor Iris Ruiz shared Cruz Medina's Latinx bibliography with us as a model, and Dr. Medina gave us permission to post that bibliography to the *LiCS* website this summer; Dr. Ruiz also provided important feedback that shaped the policy statement. We are grateful to both Dr. Ruiz and Dr. Medina. Efforts are underway to publish or link to additional annotated bibliographies to serve as resources for scholars in our field. We have revised our review form so that readers offer authors feedback on the diversity of scholarship cited in the submission.

In spring 2019, we developed and implemented new procedures for vetting special issue proposals through the Editorial Board to ensure that these proposals were carefully reviewed by scholars representing a range of perspectives.

In response to questions raised by Eric Darnell Pritchard, in fall 2019 we started the IRB process for a self-study in which we ask authors we've published to complete a demographic survey. We also plan to gather statistics about peer review and analyze reviewer reports on rejected manuscripts to identify what issues led a manuscript to be rejected and to pinpoint how we could work more effectively in moving authors toward publication.

3. Diversifying the Journal's Reviewers. In fall 2019 we implemented staggered terms of service for reviewers. We solicited suggestions for new reviewers from the Editorial Board in August 2019, asking the board to intentionally seek to diversify the pool in every way possible, from making sure that diverse backgrounds and perspectives are represented to ensuring we have expanded areas of specialization. We will be inviting new reviewers in the coming months.

4. Reviewing the Journal's Communication Practices. Prompted by Dr. Ruiz and Dr. Pritchard, the Editorial Board created an Ad Hoc Subcommittee to create guidelines/policies about fostering inclusive meeting practices, working culture, and editorial/board structures. We hope both to examine and recommend local practices that will help us be more inclusive (in terms of access, roles, making meetings more welcoming, supporting grad students, addressing the risks of editing) and sustain systemic anti-racist practices that impact academic publishing on a larger scale (self-studies, efforts to partner with other journals in the field). We endeavor to continue this work as we bring on new editorial team members with diverse backgrounds, institutional homes, and intellectual and methodological commitments.

Several issues and questions guide the ongoing work described above, and we would like to share them here, perhaps to help others in pursuing substantive and equitable answers:

1. How can we ensure representation of scholars of color, trans* scholars, feminist scholars, etc.?
2. How can we be accountable to all communities, their histories, and their labor?
3. How can we establish and promote citation practices that foster deep engagement and not "rhetorical tokenism"?
4. How can we implement communication practices that help us to be transparent and responsive at every stage of our work?
5. How can we as a journal and as individuals do the above work consistently without assuming or relying on people of color to do the work of inclusivity?
6. How can we adopt specific working practices that ensure that our meetings are inclusive of and welcoming to all, including by increasing awareness and sensitivity in all of our interactions to ensure that microaggressions are not committed?
7. How can we use our specific work on anti-racist and inclusive publishing practices to prompt or continue field-wide change?

These questions build on earlier efforts we have made in terms of *LiCS*'s publishing practices. Although we have a history of mentoring early-career authors to revise manuscripts suitable for review and/or extensive revision, seeking out literacy-related presentations by underrepresented scholars at CCCC and other conferences to invite them to submit work to the journal, and beginning conversations with our peer journals about the racist structures which underwrite academic publishing, there is more work to be done.

These are necessary, but not sufficient, steps to diversify participation with and publication in *LiCS*. In all of these efforts, we welcome feedback, resources, or partnership with our readers, our authors, and our larger academic community.

Brenda Glascott—*Portland State University*
Tara Lockhart—*San Francisco State University*
Juli Parrish—*University of Denver*
Chris Warnick—*College of Charleston*

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Defining Translinguality

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Sara P. Alvarez Queens College, CUNY

KEYWORDS

translinguality; plurilinguality; translanguaging; code-meshing;
language commodification; labor theory of language

[Translinguality] is an occasion for labor, the labor of revision that is always what we, in concert with our students, take up, and take responsibility for (whether or not we acknowledge that responsibility) in our thinking, teaching/learning, writing.

—Lu and Horner, “Translingual Work,” 216.

In this essay, we address conflicting views of *translinguality* in the fields of composition and of language and literacy education more broadly. Our aim is not to identify the correct meaning for *translinguality*, nor do we expect to be able to resolve all dispute about the meaning of the term—a task that from our perspective is not merely futile but misguided in its approach to language and language users. Rather, we intend to use the mixed history and mixed usage of *translinguality* as well as some of the terms and practices with which it is often linked—e.g., *plurilingualism*, *translanguaging*, *code-meshing*, *second language writing*, *bilingualism*, *multilingualism*—to tease out differences in the positions that might be taken on language and languages, language users, contexts of use, and the relations of all these to one another, and to better understand how writing takes place within and beyond norms of monolingualism (see Lu and Horner, “Translingual Literacy”).

We argue for *translinguality* as a way to interrogate and unveil terms of language ontology, language user agency, and the kinds of social relations advanced: matters of ideology about language and language practice. While this project is theoretical in its concern with conceptualizations of all these, we take theory to be “a process in society,” as Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff put it, the aim and point of which is “social intervention” (2, 3). Hence, our project is directed not at cataloguing the various positions to be taken on language, language users, contexts of use, and the relations of these to one another, or even in adjudicating among these, but, instead, at advancing a particular position on these and articulating what distinguishes that position from others. At the very least, it is hoped that the articulation of our position will help to account for some of the confusions and conflicts besetting recent discussions on translinguality.

We begin by describing the current state of scholarly discourse on translinguality in composition studies, locating that discourse in the larger context of both changing sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions and the scholarship from a range of disciplinary perspectives addressing language difference in response to those changing conditions. We then distinguish among these responses in terms of the ontological status accorded languages and, consequently, the ways that difference in language is understood; the kind of agency ascribed to language users in relation to languages;

“By recognizing the role of language users’ concrete labor in sustaining and revising language, a translingual orientation acknowledges opacity and friction as normal components of social interactions rather than as problems to be eradicated or condemned.”

and the implications of particular configurations of these for social relations and, more specifically, social justice. We use these distinctions to articulate our own perspective on translinguality, one that has grown to focus on the concrete labor of language

use as a means of advancing social relations to language other than those treating language(s) and even language practices as commodities, and to make more salient how translinguality addresses social justice concerns. Commodity relations occlude the role of concrete labor in (re)producing language, rendering language not as itself the ongoing outcome of labor but, instead and at most, a set of available tools or resources for achieving so-called transparent or effective communication. In contrast, a translingual orientation, at least as we define it, can bring back into recognition the role of that concrete labor in sustaining and revising language, and hence can redefine the social relations between and among language users and language. By recognizing the role of language users’ concrete labor in sustaining and revising language, a translingual orientation acknowledges opacity and friction as normal components of social interactions rather than as problems to be eradicated or condemned. Based on that perspective, we offer a critique of alternative formulations of language difference generally and translinguality in particular and call on composition teacher-scholars to rethink language difference in light of that critique.

Translinguality in Context: The (Re) Emergence of Language Difference

The term *translinguality* came to prominence in composition studies with the 2011 publication of “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach” (Horner et al., 2011, hereafter “LDIW”). But the emergence of that term can best be understood as one point in a trajectory of growing interest in and concern about how composition teachers and scholars might better understand and respond to language difference in writing. LDIW itself references CCCC’s 1974 position statement *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*, and the original bibliography accompanying LDIW presents a long list of scholarly works that the authors describe as “helpful in [their] thinking about translingual work” (309), at least some (though not all) of which can be identified with composition scholarship. So, despite the LDIW authors’ admission that they are still “at the beginning stages of [their] learning

efforts in this project” (310)—a position marked by the denotation of their project in the title as merely working “*Toward a Translingual Approach*” (emphasis added) —LDIW can be seen not so much as initiating but, instead, articulating, forwarding, and attempting to give a particular direction to an ongoing move toward what the authors term “a translingual approach” to language difference.

Different Terms, Same Meaning?

In that ongoing move, scholars who now explicitly advance a translingual perspective have previously invoked other available terms to name what they would argue for (see Trimbur, “Translingualism”). For example, prior to Suresh Canagarajah’s publication of his book *Translingual Practice* and his edited collection *Literacy as Translingual Practice*, Canagarajah has argued for a “codemeshing,” a “plurilingual,” and a “world Englishes” approach to writing (“World Englishes”; “Place”; “Translanguaging”); Juan Guerra and Keith Gilyard have (separately) called for a “transcultural literacy” approach (Guerra, “Cultivating”; Gilyard, “Cross-Talk”); Lu and Horner, two of LDIW’s co-authors, have argued for a “multilingual” approach to resist monolingualism (“Resisting”); Horner, Donahue, and NeCamp have argued for taking a “*translingual* norm” to work “toward a *multilingual* composition scholarship” (emphasis added); and in 2002, LDIW co-authors Horner and Trimbur argued for “an actively *multilingual* language policy” to supplant the tacit policy of unidirectional English-only monolingualism they identified with US composition (“English Only” 597). Thus, over the course of a few decades, a variety of terms have been put forth by composition scholars to name the preferred alternative to monolingualism (see Canagarajah, “World Englishes” 273-74), inevitably causing some degree of confusion, and to a great extent adding to the conflation of other approaches more firmly associated with these other terms with a “translingual” approach.

Different Meanings for the Same Terms: Translinguality, Plurilinguality, Code-meshing, Translanguaging

Confusion about the meaning of *translinguality* and alternative terms is furthered by different uses of each of these terms by both composition scholars and scholars in related fields. So, for example, Lachman Khubchandani writes of a plurilingual “ethos” that has long governed language practice in the Indian subcontinent (“Plurilingual,” *Revisualizing*), whereas the Council of Europe advocates inculcating plurilinguality as a new kind of communicative competence needed now:

- To equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer co-operation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry.
- To promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication.
- To maintain and further develop the richness and diversity of European cultural life through greater mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including those less widely taught.

- To meet the needs of a multilingual and multicultural Europe by appreciably developing the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries, which requires a sustained, lifelong effort to be encouraged, put on an organised footing and financed at all levels of education by the competent bodies. (3)

Both comparative literature scholar Steven Kellman and the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages advocate what they call translinguality, but the former treats it as a kind of special “sensitivity” characterizing writers of literature who compose in what is viewed as more than one language or in a language other than their perceived “primary” language (Kellman and Stavans 13), whereas the latter addresses translinguality as a competence to be inculcated in students to prepare them for an increasingly globalized world. Hence what the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages identifies as a translingual competence appears to mean something close to the “plurilinguality” advocated by the Council of Europe (cf. Molina).¹

Jeroen Gevers treats translinguality as necessarily involving, and coterminous with, code-meshing, whereas LDIW co-author Min-Zhan Lu rejects the metaphor of “codes” (“Metaphors”), and she and Horner reject defining translinguality in terms of code-meshing, instead defining a translingual approach as “one that recognizes difference *as* the norm, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dominant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as ‘standard’” (“Translingual Writing” 586; see also 600; Vance). Paul Kei Matsuda has observed that, adding to the confusion, “[M]any applied linguists use the term ‘code-mixing’ interchangeably with code-switching, which is more or less the same idea as code-meshing,” but that, alas, as he acknowledges, the heretofore idiosyncratic use of *code-switching* by Wheeler and Swords (a.k.a. “codeswitching”) to refer to maintaining separate spheres for designated codes rather than mixing and meshing them “is also beginning to make its way back to applied linguistics” (“It’s the Wild” 134). Adding further to the confusion, code-switching is regularly conflated with translanguaging (see Li Wei, “Translanguaging and Code-Switching”; Otheguy et al. 282; cf. Canagarajah, “Codemeshing”). To address this confusion, Juan Guerra has proposed the more felicitous term “code segregation” as an alternative to what *code-switching* has come to mean, albeit as of this writing his proposed term has yet to gain traction (*Language* 27).

A further conflict appears in the terms claimed for moving beyond the purely linguistic in conceptualizing communicative practices. For example, while Li Wei defines translanguaging as an approach that treats “language as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource for sense- and meaning-making” (“Translanguaging as a Practical” 22), Canagarajah states that it is *codemeshing*, “[u]nlike *translanguaging*,” that accommodates the possibility of mixing communicative modes and diverse symbol systems (other than language)” (“Codemeshing” 403, emphasis added).

The broader scholarly context adds further grist for confusion. For example, there remains a longstanding tradition in comparative and world literatures of treating the term *translingual* as signalling little more than writing that involves movement from one language to another (see for example Kellman; Liu).² In David Gramling’s provocative analysis of *The Invention of Monolingualism*,

for instance, *translinguality* is invoked to infer simply writing that entails translation from one named language to another. And Ryuko Kubota, in her attempt to unveil what she sees as a troubling “multi-plural turn” in applied linguistics, unfortunately lumps translanguaging with translanguaging, plurilingualism, code-meshing, and metrolingualism, ignoring the multiple and conflicting ways each of these terms has been defined (see Moore and Gajo; Li Wei, “Translanguaging as a Practical” 9-10).³

Labor Pains

This history of the use of different terms for what may be the same perspective, and of ascribing different, even contradictory meanings and perspectives to the same term, gives a somewhat different inflection to Lu and Horner’s admonition that “translingual” is “at most, and at its best, an occasion for labor” (“Translingual Work” 216). We take the need for such labor not as a reason to dismiss the potential of the term: we do not imagine that the matter will someday be settled, nor do we believe that disputes about its meaning signal a limitation in the term itself. Instead, we take the differences in the meanings being attributed to *translinguality* as evidence of the growing struggle accompanying an emerging epistemological break, in composition studies and elsewhere, regarding languages, users, contexts of use, and the relations of all these to one another.⁴

Because, in our view, *translinguality* signals that break, it is to be expected that, rather than grasping its significance in terms of such a break, *translinguality* is instead commandeered to signal the equivalent of other, more familiar, understandings of these—e.g., conventional models of multilingualism, or mixed language use (code switching and/or meshing), use of what are commonly viewed and treated as “nonstandard” forms of a particular language (e.g., world Englishes, AAL) or mixtures of these with what is expected will be recognized as “standard”—and that it is conflated with competing terms that have recently emerged to make sense of language difference—*plurilingualism*, *translanguaging*, *metrolingualism*, *cosmopolitan literacy*, *transcultural literacy* (cf. Otheguy et al., 282, for a similar discussion about uptakes of *translanguaging*).⁵

This brings us to the larger context prompting the emergence of *translinguality* and these other terms: the increasingly undeniable linguistic heterogeneity and fluctuating character of language practices worldwide, brought on by changes in global communication technologies and migration patterns, with the *locus classicus* being Steven Vertovec’s (2007) notion of the emergence of “superdiversity.”⁶ It is in light of the perception of these changing conditions that what had once seemed like adequate conceptual frameworks for understanding language, languages, language users, contexts of use, and the relations of these to one another have come under challenge. For example, in 1997, Constant Leung and his colleagues, writing about the urban English context, argued that while “TESOL practice in the schooling sector in England has implicitly assumed that ESL students are linguistic and social outsiders and that there is a neat one-to-one correspondence between ethnicity and language . . . demographic and social changes in the past 30 years have rendered such assumptions inadequate and misleading, particularly in multiethnic urban areas,” leading them to call on teachers to “question the pedagogical relevance of the notion of *native speaker*” (543,

emphasis added). In 2006, Suresh Canagarajah, pointing to “intensified globalization of English in postmodern society,” argued that “if earlier arguments haven’t radically changed the status of English varieties in literacy and education, recent social and communicative developments should” (“Place” 588), with the implication that world Englishes can now take their rightful place in composition teaching, and that “Outer” and “Expanding” Circle users of English have a significant role to play in shaping the constitution of “English.” Horner, writing in 2010, argued that those working in the “Anglo-American sphere” in composition needed to engage in cross-language relations in part as a response to “changes in the language backgrounds of the students in our classes, or at least changes in our perceptions of our students’ languages” following from changes in patterns of immigration to the US, in admissions to US college and universities, the growing permeability between ESL and non-ESL students, as well as the globalization of English (“Introduction” 3, 4, 5). Xiaoye You, in his 2016 book advocating “cosmopolitan English” and “transliteracy,” describes the emergence of “new conceptualizations of language and literacy” in applied linguistics, literacy studies, and writing studies as a response to “[t]he proliferation of symbols and meanings due to colonization, migration, trade, and communication technologies” that he claims “is a defining feature of our times” (ix). And writing in 2018, Li Wei argues that what he terms the “Post-Multilingualism” era “raises fundamental questions about what language is for ordinary men and women in their everyday social interactions,” given the fact that, as he sees it,

simply having many different languages *is no longer sufficient* either for the individual or for society as a whole, but multiple ownerships and more complex interweaving of languages and language varieties, and where boundaries between languages, between languages and other communicative means, and the relationship between language and the nation-state are being constantly reassessed, broken, or adjusted by speakers on the ground. Concepts such as native, foreign, indigenous, minority languages are also constantly being reassessed and challenged. What is more, *communication in the 21st century requires much more involvement* with what has traditionally been viewed as non-linguistic means and urges us to overcome the ‘lingua bias’ of communication. (“Translanguaging as a Practical Theory” 14-15, emphasis added; cf. Creese, Blackledge, and Takhi 191)

As such works also make clear, the dominant, prevailing language ideology in contradistinction to which they are positing alternatives remains monolingualism.⁷ That ideology posits languages as stable, internally uniform, and discrete from one another. Each language is identified with a particular nationality and/or race/ethnicity as a defining attribute of that nationality and/or race/ethnicity (think “French” or “Chinese” as denoting not merely a nationality but also, at least ostensibly, its inhabitants’ sole, stable, internally uniform language/culture/ethnicity), and language users are expected to have a single such language as their birthright as its “native speakers.” Their ostensible command of that language (as monolith), achieved naturally through advance to adulthood, is posited as the target for others to aim for, however unlikely these others may be to reach that target. A shared language is deemed essential to communication, treated as the unproblematic transfer of meaning among its speakers—an assumption that renders diversity, let alone superdiversity, suspect. Opacity, by contrast, is deemed as evidence of a failure to use the language properly, or to grasp it fully. Language

difference is thus the exception to the norm, acceptable only as the expression of creative genius by those so authorized—e.g., Writers of Literature (see Lu, “Professing”).

In challenging notions of the native speaker, the status of world Englishes, and (therefore) notions of target languages, language acquisition, and standard languages, composition scholars are aligned with and learning from past as well as current scholarship in related and intersecting fields of language study. For example, back in 1975, Einar Haugen suggested that the concept of a language, while in some ways a “useful fiction,” “can now be replaced by more sophisticated models” (335).⁸ In 1985, Thomas Paikeday pronounced the native speaker “dead.” In a 2000 review of an edited collection on standard English, Nikolas Coupland concluded that “there are good reasons to move on from ontological perspectives that reify, describe and account for S[tandard]E[nglish] as a ‘natural’ or ‘necessary’ sociolinguistic reality” (632), in alignment with arguments made earlier by Rosina Lippi-Green and later by James Milroy. In 1997, Alan Firth and Johannes Wagner called for a break from what they termed the “individualistic and mechanistic” view of discourse and communication they saw as then dominating second language acquisition (SLA) studies, arguing that such a perspective “fails to account in a satisfactory way for interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language” (285). Rejecting the legitimacy of dominant SLA conceptions of a “target language,” “interlanguage,” and “learner,” and the distinction between “native” and “nonnative” speakers, they called for “a significantly enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use,” among other changes (286). Peter Mühlhäusler, in his 1996 book *Linguistic Ecology*, proposed an ecological model that abandoned the “givenness” of languages and the boundaries between them and the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic means of communication. As Jean-Louis Calvet observes, this effectively calls into question “the whole contemporary linguistic approach,” which is effectively “blown out of the water” (13).

These (and other) studies suggest that the growing interest among scholars of composition and literacy studies in challenges to prevailing notions of language and language difference is, if anything, late, its own history of shifting understandings of these constituting the equivalent of tidal debris marking, and produced by, earlier shifts and forces emanating elsewhere. But it is more likely the case that, as in other related fields, acknowledgement of the inadequacy of such concepts is commonly followed quickly by ignoring the implications of what is acknowledged, as Otheguy, García, and Reid rightly complain (283, 286). Hence complaints that the insights of translingual theory regarding, say, the ontological status of language are not “new” to other fields are beside the point: however well established these insights may be in these other fields, those fields honor them primarily “in the breach,” allowing them to remain largely unaddressed, unfronted, ignored.

Conditions, Catalysts, and Conflicting Responses: Ideological Struggle

A degree of confusion in response to any epistemological break seems unavoidable. We take at least some of this confusion as a manifestation that scholars are mistaking the conditions of more apparent linguistic “superdiversity,” brought on by changes to global migration patterns and

communication technologies, as themselves representing a new norm to replace monolingualism, rather than as merely the precipitating catalyst for questioning prevailing orthodox views of languages, language users, contexts of use, and the relations of these to one another. So, because practices of code switching/meshing and translanguaging appear to challenge the discrete character of languages, they are themselves sometimes taken as preferable to refraining from such code-switching/meshing (see, for example, Young, “Keep”). However, as Gramling, Makoni and Pennycook, and others have observed, such a move can reinforce monolingualist ideology by pluralizing it, leading to a multilingualism that, while seeming to bespeak tolerance, maintains the boundaries between languages from among which writers are now permitted to draw more broadly (as “resources” or “repertoires”) and reinforcing insistence on transparency in communication (of goods, services, and most of all, capital—see Gramling 37 and *passim*; Blackledge et al. 192-93; Blommaert, “Complexity” 613; discussion below). In such uptakes, the monolingualist ideal of clear and untroubled communication remains, and code-switching/meshing and translanguaging become no more than a means of achieving that ideal, reinforcing the reification of language practices into readily identifiable and discrete “codes” available for mixing or meshing (see Lu, “Metaphors”; Vance).

Alternatively, the tenets of a translingual perspective on languages, language users, contexts of use, and the relations of these to one another might well be posed even absent any ostensible changes in communicative practice toward more recognizably “mixed” or “meshed” forms.⁹ That they have not been posed previously is not in itself evidence that communicative practice has changed in

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specific ways, any more than a change in scientific thinking signals a change in natural phenomena. Instead, the alternative may represent simply, if crucially, a change in our understanding of language practice (cf. Gasset 242). Hence, just as the “new literacy studies” developed not as a response to a change to literacy practices—a

reaction to some new set of phenomena—but, instead, as a change in how literacy was to be understood (e.g., as an ideological social practice) (see Street, “New” 28), the development of a different perspective on language and language difference is a signal not of a change in language practices to be heralded as an improvement on or repudiation of previous practices. Instead, it is a change in how language(s), language users, contexts of use, and the relations of these to one another are understood: a change in how we think language difference. Thus, the translingual slogan that language difference is the norm is not an indication of changes to language practices from, say, homogeneity to heterogeneity in uses of “named languages.” Rather, difference in language is itself conceptualized differently, as an inevitable feature of all utterances, whether deemed “standard” or not, conventional or deviant.

The concept of ideology is useful in this regard. We can take language ideologies as representing a constellation of beliefs about languages and their relations to language users and contexts of use. But all language ideologies are by definition at some remove from actual language practices while nonetheless influencing those practices, most obviously but not solely at the level of policy (see Kramsch, “Privilege” 23). So, for example, there is a longstanding belief in the U.S. that English is and always has been the official and only language of those perceived as its citizens despite strong evidence to the contrary (see Crawford, *Hold*; Kloss; Trimbur, “Linguistic”), and there is a longstanding belief that specific demographic populations are characterized by their use of a single, stable language variety, again despite strong evidence to the contrary (see, for example, Riggs, Royster). That remove of ideology from actuality provides grist for challenging particular language ideologies for their failure to adequately represent the realities of language practice. Indeed, as we argue above, that failure is part of what has led to efforts to formulate alternative conceptions of languages and their relations to one another and to language users and contexts of use.

However, it is also possible, far easier, and therefore far more tempting to accommodate those practices that contradict a prevailing language ideology to that ideology. In such a strategy of accommodation, those practices are either treated as mere exceptions to or deviations (creative or mistaken) from the rule, effectively reinforcing it, or they are adapted to the ideology. In the case of the language ideology of monolingualism, we can see the former strategy in the distinctions between performance and competence and notions of an interlanguage (Firth and Wagner), or the treatment of these practices as evidence of “creativity” in the “breaking beyond” standards by those deemed Artists. We can see the latter strategy in reifications of seemingly deviant practices as constituting additional sets of language standards, each appropriate to a designated social sphere (see Fairclough).

But a more damaging, because unintended, response is to imagine one is pursuing a break with that ideology while its governing assumptions continue their reign in the proposed alternative model. The difficulty here is real: how to think a phenomenon differently than the available terms and conceptual frameworks seem to allow. We can see efforts to give novel inflections to conventional terms like “multilingualism” in the examples cited above as one strategy by which to meet that challenge. Another is to invent neologisms (or steal to give new meaning to terms from other fields): the invention or uptake of terms such as *plurilingualism*, *translanguaging*, and *translinguality* can be understood as attempting this strategy. However, as already suggested, even these efforts can lead to mistaking a difference in packaging for a difference in substance: old wine in new bottles. At least some of the excitement generated by the emergence of these neologisms can be attributed to just such a false sense of difference, given the ultimate comfort yielded by the domestication of the ostensibly unfamiliar thereby achieved. In those cases, the break attempted through the introduction of the neologism is effectively repaired by redefining the break in terms that accommodate it to the dominant ideology.

We have then conditions precipitating an epistemological break, various kinds of responses to those conditions, and significant confusion. In light of the confused status of terminology, we sort through this not by terminological categories—translinguality vs., say, translanguaging or code meshing or plurilingualism—but by considering what might constitute an epistemological break

from the language ideology of monolingualism. We argue for translinguality not in opposition to these other categories—futile given the diverse meanings currently ascribed to each and all—but, rather, in terms of language ontology, language user agency, and the kinds of social relations advanced: matters of ideology about language and language practice. A translingual approach, we argue, can and should be defined in a way that constitutes a break with dominant monolingualist language ideology in the ontological status it accords language(s); the agency attributed to language users; and the social relations to advances. We argue further that while translingual theory, as we define it, responds to many of the same phenomena as do arguments for translanguaging and plurilingualism, and aligns with many of their claims, it can be distinguished from these arguments by its insistent focus on labor as its point of address in defining language difference. Its foundation in a labor theory of language leads to a quite different, though not competing, set of social justice concerns in relation to language difference than those articulated by advocates of translanguaging and plurilingualism. It defines language difference in terms of labor that is not typically recognized as labor, and hence a definition not readily recognizable as having anything to do with either language difference or social justice. Against an insistence on achieving understanding, it argues for opacity as a constant, necessary element of social interaction—what Edouard Glissant refers to as the “right to opacity” (*Poetics* 190).¹⁰ With that insistence on opacity comes recognition of the inevitability as well as constant necessity of labor in engaging such opacity. Given its applicability to all language use and users, a translingual theory is thereby less likely to be relegated to the cultural margins. For it takes as its point of departure not particular language practices already marked by the language ideology of monolingualism as “different” but, instead, all language as labor confronting and producing difference.

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This focus on labor has prompted concern that translingual theory may risk “flattening” all language difference, thereby neglecting significant differences in the status accorded some kinds of language difference and those populations identified with them—even, ironically, differences in the labor demands imposed on those with lower status by those enjoying more privileged status: who is required to explain themselves

to whom, how, according to and judged by whom. Such concerns emanate from and focus on the language differences that monolingualism has already disposed us to recognize as such: the sense in which we each and all speak and write a variety of language by definition at some distance from, and therefore different than, the putative “standard.” Importantly, as Gilyard, Otheguy et al., and others

have rightly pointed out, such differences do not enjoy the same status nor, hence, have the same kinds of consequences for specific groups of speakers (Gilyard, “Rhetoric” 286; Otheguy et al.). Those kinds of language difference are consequent upon monolingualist reifications and commodifications of language that produce a sense of specific varieties of language (including idiolects and dialects as well as the “standard” language): languages and language varieties understood as entities that, as Gilyard puts it, people “have” (or don’t, “Rhetoric” 287) but that are accorded different levels of status (including negative status) on the basis of the status of those individuals and groups to which they are said to “belong.”¹¹ The resulting differences in labor are differences in commodity relations—here, differences in the exchange value ascribed various reifications of languages/language varieties. Such reifications of languages and varieties are ascribed particular exchange values depending on their putative communicative power, an ascription that occludes the labor entailed in making meaning from any and all utterances.

We can see these reifications operating in the argument Otheguy et al. make for translanguaging. Otheguy et al. distinguish between idiolects and what they call “named languages” by deeming the latter but not the former social constructs rather than properly linguistic categories, however useful in other ways. These “named languages” are defined as “not true linguistic entities because their boundaries are established on non-linguistic grounds. Rather, they are groupings of idiolects of people with shared social, political or ethnic identities” (Otheguy et al. 291). The authors acknowledge that “there are, to be sure, large areas of overlap between the idiolects of people who communicate with each other,” including people from the same region or nation sharing “some sort of linguistically mediated cultural or historical identity” (290). But the authors maintain a sharp divide between such groupings and idiolects *per se*.

The sharp divide that Otheguy et al. attempt to maintain between idiolects and “named languages” is meant to highlight, first, the circular illogic of presuming a linguistic category—e.g., “English”—prior to analyzing features of language practice categorized thus to define that category. More forcefully, it is intended to honor the unity among the language resources that bilinguals/multilinguals are said to possess, rather than seeing them as a mixture that might be identified from an “outside” perspective as belonging to and combining separate categories (e.g., Spanish vs. English). As Otheguy et al. state, “seen from the point of view of the speaker, that is, from the insider’s perspective, . . . the question of which words [in a bilingual’s vocabulary] belong to English and which ones belong to Spanish (and which ones to both) cannot be asked coherently. . . . they all belong to the same idiolect” (291). The insistence on this unity is the basis for their argument that bilinguals should be allowed to draw on as full a range of their idiolectal resources as monolinguals are, through “translanguaging,” rather than being restricted to using only some of their resources on the basis of artificial social boundaries on language use (e.g., using only words designated as English) (295). Translanguaging, they argue, refers to the act of deploying all of a speaker’s lexical and structural resources *freely*. . . *without regard for socially and politically defined language labels or boundaries*” (297, emphasis in original), a freedom they wish all to have access to.

But in invoking idiolects, Otheguy et al. reintroduce the reification of language that they are otherwise at pains to undermine in their treatment of named languages and the accompanying

demand for transparency in communication, as opposed to recognizing the normality of opacity in communication.¹² The notion of language as stable “resource,” described as what individuals possess (“all the words together [‘Spanish’ and ‘English’] [that] belong to Ofelia and Ricardo and their children, that is, to their idiolects” [291]), while being rejected in terms of nation states, is accepted in terms of the individual as a means of achieving such communicative transparency. We can see this in their argument regarding anxieties over the preservation of minoritized languages. They reject the aim of “preserv[ing] a pure, well-bounded and essential collection of lexical and structural features,” but then argue for the “affirmation and preservation” of “a cultural-linguistic complex of multiple idiolects and translanguaging practices that the community finds valuable.” As they state, “It is toward the affirmation and preservation of these complexes, and not of named essentialist objects, that [language] maintenance and revitalization efforts are properly directed” (299). Thus, while rejecting the reification of named languages (e.g., Euskara, Maori, Hawaiian, English, Spanish, French, etc.), their argument deflects that reification onto complexes of idiolects and the “community” of the speakers of those idiolects, a deflection that simply redirects questions about what constitutes the essence of the “named” language into questions about whose idiolects will count as the “community’s” (and who is authorized to say).

In contrast, the labor perspective on language difference for which we argue breaks from such reifications and commodifications of language (and language difference), and thereby from the commodity relations underlying the rightly decried linguicism. Rather than asking what words or other linguistic features to allow or not, or to categorize in a particular way, to achieve transparency in communication, it focuses on the labor involved in (re)producing specific languages; it asks what difference any particular utterance—by definition phenomenologically different from others in spatiotemporal location and, therefore, in sociopolitical significance—might make, and by means of what kinds of labor. Rather than posing that question in terms of rhetorical effect by restricting the differences possible to those made to the situation addressed—as conventional rhetorical considerations would—it asks what difference an utterance might make to the language deployed: whether and how it might reinforce and thereby contribute to the sedimentation of, challenge, or pose new meanings to specific lexico-grammatical and other cultural practices, and how the labor of utterance inevitably transforms those practices (including the transformation represented by their further sedimentation), and what processes and conditions might contribute to any one of these consequences. Hence, as Horner observes, rather than calling for a break from ordinary practice, a translingual orientation calls “for a different understanding of what language practice entails,” its critical political edge arising “less from the language rights such an orientation demands and more from its recognition of the agency of language ‘users’ operating in all language use” (Horner, “Reflecting” 108).

By insisting on the inevitability of the spatiotemporal, and hence sociopolitical, difference of all utterances for the contexts of use and the language used, it restores to recognition the contribution made by the concrete labor of speakers, writers, listeners, and readers to the reproduction of “conventional” language practices, sought after by many student and other writers, and hence their status vis-à-vis those practices. For rather than restricting recognition of “production” and

“creativity” only to those utterances that are lexicographically deviant from what is deemed merely commonplace and conventional, it recognizes the inherent productivity operating in language “reproduction,” the creativity operating in the “recreative.” From a translanguaging perspective, language, as Blommaert puts it

is *fundamentally* creative, and it *always* produces something entirely new within the bandwidth of the sociolinguistic or socio-semiotic economies in which participants dwell. Note that, thus, creativity can not be seen anymore the way we saw it until now: as special. It is simply the default mode of production of what we call, by lack as yet of better words, ‘language’—hence ‘linguaging.’ (“Complexity” 614, emphasis added)¹³

Ontology

The questionable ontological status of language is, for us, most succinctly put by Calvet’s formulation “Practices > Languages,” signaling that languages are the ever-emerging outcome of practices rather than entities that practices merely express.¹⁴ As he explains, “[I]t is practices that constitute languages. . . [L]anguages exist only in and through their speakers, and they are reinvented, renewed and transformed in every interaction, each time that we speak” (6, 7). This means that, at least in terms of the conventional, monolingualist conception of languages, “*languages do not exist*; the notion of a *language* is an abstraction that rests on the regularity of a certain number of facts, of features, in the products of speakers and in their *practices*” (241).

This is close to Otheguy et al.’s deconstruction of “named” languages (286ff.). But, Calvet continues, “Coexisting with these practices there are *representations*—what people think about languages and the way they are spoken—representations that act on practices and are one of the factors of change. They produce in particular *security/insecurity* and this leads speakers to types of *behaviour* that transform practices” (241, emphases in original). Hence, as Calvet explains, “*the invention of a language* and consequently the *way it is named* constitute an intervention in and modify the ecolinguistic niche” (248, emphases in original).

This is how it is possible that, while languages do not exist in the same way that, say, the universe exists, beliefs about language exist and affect practice, and, hence, affect language, idiolects included. In short, the divide Otheguy et al. wish to maintain between idiolects and named languages is, by Calvet’s account, regularly breached. And, while it is true, as Gilyard complains, that “when I am around a group of people who speak a language foreign to me, it amounts to nothing to counsel myself that language is really an abstraction and that those speakers don’t really have that language that I don’t comprehend” (287), his complaint, pertinent to Otheguy et al.’s argument, does not contradict Calvet’s notion of language as an abstraction that Gilyard is critiquing. Instead, it speaks to the power of representations (as language practices themselves) to affect subsequent practice, including, for us most powerfully, the representation/belief that the opacity in communication Gilyard complains of is abnormal rather than the inevitable, constant norm and component of all communicative acts.¹⁵

We can see that representation/belief in the Council of Europe’s argument for plurilinguality. At least as the Council defines it, plurilinguality seems to be aimed at eliminating, or at least

ameliorating, the hypothetical situation Gilyard describes of not understanding the language. For the plurilingualized individual would have some partial understanding of at least some of what was being said, depending on the individual's specific competence in that language, and, hence, it would be *less foreign* to that person. Opacity would thus be reduced, if not eliminated. By effectively rendering languages as mere codes available for various decoding and recoding, such an approach, in line with monolingualism, has as its aim the erasure of difference through occluding the labor of translation (cf. Flores; Gramling).

Those responses to the language ideology of monolingualism that herald mixing of languages, or codes, or that herald the legitimacy of what are deemed non-standard languages/codes would, conversely, seem to reinforce the ontological status of the languages or codes posited. As Otheguy et al. themselves warn, “[N]o matter how broadly and positively conceived, the notion of code switching still constitutes a theoretical endorsement of the idea that what the bilingual manipulates, however masterfully, are two separate linguistic systems” (282; cf. Blommaert, “Complexity” 613). So, for example, while Vershawn Ashanti Young maintains that all language “codes” are always already “meshed,” hence not separable as “codes,” he also argues strongly that such meshing be allowed to take place. Code-meshing, then, appears at once to be unavoidable, on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand, also a choice, or what should be permitted, in contradistinction to, say, code segregation.

At least some arguments for translanguaging appear to suffer from a similar confusion. For example, Li Wei argues that translanguaging refers to a process of language production rather than to any specific forms that result, and hence would appear to constitute at best an orientation to communicative practice that is intended to “challenge boundaries . . . between named languages, boundaries between the so-called linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-linguistic means of communication, and boundaries between language and other human cognitive capacities” (“Translanguaging and Code-Switching”). But the practices identified as exemplifying such challenges—communications that “cross” what viewers/listeners/readers are predisposed to recognize as distinct—appear to be dependent on, and a reaction to, the boundaries they “challenge,” and thereby, perversely if inadvertently, risk reinforcing those boundaries. However valuable such challenges may be as tactics, they do not challenge the distinctions themselves, only arguments for the segregation of what is accepted by the language ideology of monolingualism as ontologically distinct: here, one language vs. another, what is and isn't linguistic, etc. It is telling, in this regard, that, as we argue below, such arguments have as their primary focus language users and uses already marked by the language ideology of monolingualism as different—bilinguals mixing or translanguaging.¹⁶

Agency

Agency in language use is commonly located in acts that break, intentionally, with perceived norms, in close relation to notions of creativity defined in terms of novelty or “artful” performance: utterances that are “*distinctive* from ongoing interaction, in which the communication itself is highlighted and subject to evaluation by an audience,” even the “routine use of creative forms” (Swann and Maybin 491, emphasis added)—what is deemed (art)work, not labor. Insofar as perceived norms

are identified with the hegemonic, breaks from perceived norms are seen as manifesting criticality, whereas reproduction of such norms is identified with lack of criticality. This excludes from consideration the (possibility of the) exercise of agency in the (re)production of forms not deemed creative, not distinguishable from “ongoing interaction.” And even that agency that is recognized, as Lu and Horner have argued, is typically recognized only in “mainstream” students: those who are deemed to already be in command of the routine, hence whose breaks from routine forms are ascribed an intentionality not ascribed to comparable breaks by students deemed nonmainstream: those labeled basic writers, L2 writers, nontraditional students (Lu and Horner, “Translingual Writing” 583; see also Alvarez). Conversely, Lu and Horner observe, “mainstream writers’ seeming iterations of standardized forms and meanings are perceived as evidence of . . . their conformity to ‘common sense’ or orthodoxy, while the seeming iterations of standardized forms and meanings by ‘nonmainstream’ writers are perceived as evidence of either their mastery of the privileged language or their betrayal of their home or first languages” (583)—a perverse exercise of agency, if that.

Arguments for code-switching/meshing and translanguaging seem likewise concerned with those utterances that in some way deviate from what are recognized as language norms, specifically utterances that deploy a mix of languages, particularly in ways that deviate even from conventional practices of code-switching (as linguists have traditionally defined that term). First, as Otheguy et al. acknowledge, the notion of code switching is understood as “the expressive *transgression* by bilingual speakers of their own separate languages, endow[ing] these speakers with agency and often find[ing] in the very act of switching *elements of linguistic mastery and virtuosity*” (282, emphasis added). Likewise, Li Wei argues for translanguaging as evidence of creativity and criticality, stating that

Translanguaging *underscores multilinguals’ creativity*—their abilities to *push and break boundaries* between named language and between language varieties, and to flout norms of behaviour including linguistic behaviour, and *criticality*—the ability to use evidence to question, problematize, and articulate views. . . . From a Translanguaging lens, multilingualism by the very nature of the phenomenon is *a rich source of creativity and criticality*, as it entails tension, conflict, competition, difference, and change in a number of spheres, ranging from ideologies, policies, and practices to historical and current contents.
(15)

Li Wei makes it clear in his article that he is primarily concerned with the language practices of “multilingual language users,” and he offers translanguaging as a “practical theory of language [that] offers better interpretations” of those practices (11). Especially for those of us used to dominant invocations and assumptions of a generic but decidedly white male heterosexual middle-class US English monolingual as the (unstated) norm (see Matsuda, “Myth”; Ohmann 145, 148-49), this concern is both necessary and long overdue. But necessary as it is, this goal by definition excludes those language practices that observers are disposed to deem unmixed, uncreative, uncritical—that is to say, the overwhelming majority of language practices. These, then, are relegated to the uninteresting and uncreative. It is against these that translanguaging is posed as the alternative.¹⁷

What stands in the way of recognizing the agency of more typical, conventional, and (therefore?) uninteresting and (or because) presumably uncreative, uncritical utterances is an atemporal

conception of language, a conception that maintains its residence even in those arguments, like Li Wei's, attempting to redefine language in terms, and as an outcome, of practices. It is that atemporal conception of language that renders particular features visible as distinctive, creative, different, new by positing a stable, internally uniform, discrete, atemporal norm against which those features are set. Such a conception of language, while recognizing the element of criticality in the recognizably unconventional, fails to recognize the element of criticality operating in production of the conventional, thereby denying the agency operating in efforts to reproduce the conventional (Horner, "Reflecting" 108-09). The inextricability of reflection from action through the word that Freire insists upon (128) is thus rendered extricable, exceptional rather than normal, rare and the province of the few rather than a constant (however repressed), for all.

Paradoxically, that conception renders the norm of monolingualism and the monolingual speaker (see above) effectively unassailable, invulnerable: hegemony rather than merely hegemonic, its status not—unlike the "hegemonic"—in continual need of repair and sustenance (see Williams, *Marxism* 112-13). In the case of Li Wei's argument for translanguaging, the non-multilinguals (or at least those deemed thus) and their practices of reiterating linguistic forms that appear to be readily identifiable with a particular named language in "regular" ways are dismissed from consideration altogether, thereby allowing the status of such practices as "regular" and as internally uniform, stable, and discrete from other languages to go unchallenged—e.g., what is deemed to be "SE" as, indeed, constituting standard English. Conversely, by recognizing the temporally different character of all utterances, including reiterations of the seemingly conventional, we can challenge the very stability and internal uniformity of the conventional. For, as Blommaert reminds us regarding language identity work, "[i]t is the habituated, low-key, routine, and ritual of identity work that shows us—amazingly—how complicated and dynamic the demands are on such work in *any* instance, even if the work is performed just 'in the pursuit of sameness'" ("Complexity" 620).

To take up such work, the questions Li Wei asks about the examples of translanguaging utterances—"the sociopolitical context in which these expressions occur, the history of [the language variety named], the subjectivities of the people who created and use these expressions, as well as the ideologies, including linguistic ideologies, that these expressions challenge"—would then return as relevant to all expressions, as would questions about the ideologies reinforced by the expressions under consideration.¹⁸ But to do so would be to acknowledge the labor necessary to maintaining as well as revising and challenging all ideologies and languages, hegemonic and counterhegemonic.

Social Relations

It is manifestly the case that the "movement" toward an epistemological break in how languages, their users, and their contexts of use are to be understood has been driven not only, and even not primarily, by changes in language practices that previously dominant conceptions of language are inadequate to explain. Rather, it has been driven at least as much, if not more, by the urgent need to defend and stand with communities who have historically and presently been the target of racial, ethnic, and class prejudice and discrimination: in the US, most prominently, African Americans,

Native Americans, Latinx/e people, residents of Appalachia and the rural South, the poor, and people perceived to be recent immigrants from the “global South.” Insofar as language, tied by the ideology of monolingualism to race, class, ethnicity, region, and nationality, has been used as a proxy target for discrimination against people identified with these communities, many teachers and scholars of language, including written language, have directed their efforts at defending the legitimacy of the language practices of those targeted: e.g., African American Language, Native American languages, translanguaging, code-mixing and meshing. Against the demand to “Speak English, This is America!” they have insisted on the right and value of knowing, speaking, and writing a variety of languages in a variety of ways.

In these arguments, language difference is defined in two ways: 1) the use of what are already demarcated as distinct languages—e.g., Spanish, Navajo, French, Chinese, Arabic—in settings where these are not the dominant demarcated language—e.g., in the U.S.—and 2) the use of any language or languages, dominant or not, in unconventional ways—e.g., mixing of languages, or using a language variety—e.g. AAL—deemed inferior to or of less value than the “standard” (because of its association with groups with lower social status). We focus on the latter insofar as these appear to challenge the stability and internal uniformity, and discrete character of demarcated languages, such as English. So, for example, Li Wei defends the “New Chinglish” by observing that

the myth of a pure form of a language is so deep-rooted that there are many people who, while accepting the existence of different languages, cannot accept the ‘contamination’ of their language by others. This is one of the reasons for Chinglish to have been the object of ridicule for generations, even though the creative process it represents is an important and integral part of language evolution. (“Translanguaging as” 14)

Against such ridiculing, Li Wei argues for the critical and creative character of Chinglish.

Ofelia García and Camela Leiva go further, arguing that translanguaging serves social justice. First, they argue that “for US Latinos, translanguaging offers the alternative of performing a dynamic bilingualism that releases them from the constraints of both an ‘Anglophone’ ideology that demands English monolingualism for US citizens and a ‘Hispanophone’ ideology that blames US Latinos for speaking ‘Spanglish’ . . . or for their ‘incomplete acquisition’ of their ‘heritage language’” (“Theorizing” 200). But they distinguish translanguaging from other “fluid” language practices—e.g., what has been called polylingualism, transidiomatic practices, metrolingualism, code-meshing—by its “transformative” character. For García and Leiva, translanguaging “could be a mechanism for social justice, especially when teaching students from language minoritized communities” through its efforts “to wipe out the hierarchy of languaging practices that deem some more valuable than others” (200). The gist is to level the status of languaging practices by recognizing the value in those previously held in low esteem. As Otheguy et al. likewise claim, “Translanguaging evens the playing field, giving bilingual students the same opportunity that monolinguals have always had, the opportunity to learn and grow while enjoying the intellectual and emotional benefits of all one’s linguistic resources” (305).

In these arguments, translanguaging is treated as both a technique for achieving and evidence of the achievement of social transformation. So, for example, García¹⁹ states that, for her,

Translanguaging refers to social practices and actions that *enact* a political process of social and subjectivity transformations, which *in turn produces translanguaging*. Besides challenging the view of languages as autonomous and pure, translanguaging *as a product of border thinking*, of subaltern knowledge conceived from a bilingual in-between position, changes the locus of enunciation and resists the asymmetries of power that “bilingual codes” often create. (García and Leiva 204, emphasis added)

While there is a lot to take in from this passage, we take the authors to be posing translanguaging as the deployment of a specific kind of formal expression that is simultaneously the means and purpose of social transformation. That postulation hinges on the idea of “enactment” as performative: translanguaging as both the expression of accomplishment and means of accomplishing a particular condition. We can see this same invocation in García’s discussion of the use of the music video “*Si Se Puede*” in her co-author Camila Leiva’s teaching of a high school class intended for immigrant newcomers to the US. Referencing the video’s “translanguaging where English is performed alongside Spanish, both in sound and image [to relate] one important message: *Unidos todos con esta canción / Si se puede* [United with this song, / Yes, we can],” García argues that

It is the translanguaging that creates a unity that is difficult to express, neither immigrant nor native and yet both; neither Spanish or English, and yet both in autopoietic organization. The music video is neither in English nor in Spanish, but in “both” that is “neither” because it is a new discourse, a product of coloniality, a *transculturación* languaging. Because the students and Camilla *are constituted in the translanguaging of the video*, they are involved in a continuous becoming that is of neither one kind nor another, but that constitutes the liberating action of an autopoietic “*Si se puede*.” As they follow the translanguaging the students are confronted with alternative *representations that release knowledge and voices* that have been silenced by the discourse about illegal aliens in English that dominates the beginning of the video. (208, emphasis added)

It would be wrong to argue with the sentiments of this proclaimed unity, or with the inclusive and transformative effects of Leiva’s use of both Spanish and English in the classroom discussion of the video, as when Leiva “wants to create through translanguaging a discourse that goes beyond autonomous languages that represent sole national or transnational identities” (211). Translanguaging, García argues, “opens up possibilities of participation, while generating the fluid subjectivities that US Latinos need to succeed in US society. Translanguaging gives back the voice that had been taken away by ideologies of monoglot standards . . . , whether of English or Spanish” (211).

In this passage, we see García making a moral argument about language rights: here, not the right to speak a given “named” language (Spanish or English) but, instead, the right to translanguage, i.e. produce utterances not readily identifiable with any single such language. This is a crucial argument we would support. From a labor perspective, however, there remain limitations to this view of translanguaging. Agency is attributed not to the speakers (or listeners) but, rather, to the technique of translanguaging—the deployment of a specific kind of forms, in this case the co-presence of both Spanish and English (in the music video and in the class discussion).²⁰ And the transmission of that technique itself then becomes the aim, rather than constituting no more than a means of making

student participation in education possible. Of course, under the current educational and political regime, to grant the right to translanguaging is a legitimate means of making student participation in education possible, and hence is necessary. But that is not the same, we argue, as assigning a liberating effect to the technique of translanguaging *per se*.

This is all the more crucial insofar as language teachers, including writing teachers, may well find the attribution of agency to a language technique especially tempting to make, as it suggests that teachers can empower students by gifting them with, or “allowing” them to use, such techniques. Through translanguaging, teachers may believe they can “give voice” or “give back the voice” to students or “enable their voices to emerge.”²¹ But while it seems clear that insisting on “English only” in the classroom described would be wrong in all sorts of ways, it also seems clear that the translanguaging that is described cannot by itself accomplish what is claimed for it; that accomplishment, rather, belongs to the students in their work with the teacher.

For, despite the claims for the accomplishment of social transformation through translanguaging (a transformation that makes possible translanguaging), the identification of the means of that transformation with the production of a specific set of formal linguistic features effectively abstracts the production practices identified as “translanguaging” from their spatiotemporal location, rendering those practices as able, in themselves, to produce specific effects. Translanguaging is thus commodified, occluding the labor of speaking and listening, reading and writing. The video, and moving across and between Spanishes and Englishes, by themselves are ascribed the power to produce transformation—an instance of commodity fetishism. In this way, the technique of translanguaging may appear to “level the playing field,” but the field, and the rules of the game being played, remain unchallenged. Everyone may now participate in that game of vocalization, but the commodity relations obtaining between the participants and the languages they vocalize remain unchallenged. Labor and the dependence of language on that labor become invisible.

Missing from this account are the range of possible meanings in response to the video, and to the mixing of Spanish and English, that may be produced through the specific concrete labor of instances of the speaking, listening, reading, and writing practices of specific speakers, listeners, readers, and

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writers. (Imagine, for example, the different responses to the video by English or Spanish or, for that matter, Chinese monolinguals, or those Spanish/English bilinguals committed to the language ideology of monolingualism). And missing from this account is the possibility of mixing of Spanish and English in efforts to produce, not a Latinx pan-ethnicity of the kind García sees Leiva and her students constructing (211), but quite different ethnic formations and politics (cf. Blackledge et al.).

In assessing the effects of languaging, we need to distinguish between (abstractions of) language practices per se and the material social conditions of those practices.²² But to recuperate all these possibilities would require attention to the labor of writing and, more specifically, rewriting and revision of the meanings made, through the labor of writers and readers, listeners and speakers. The meaning would not, then, be said to inhere in the video or translinguaging per se, but in the work to which the video and languaging practices are put.

We can see García attempting to relocate translinguaging as social practice in some such conditions, as when she asserts, “It is not enough to claim that languaging consists of social practices and actions; it is important to question and change these when they reproduce inequalities. By appealing to the concept of *translinguaging*, I go beyond simple languaging as a social practice to emphasize that a *new* discourse is being produced by a new *trans-subject*” (203). But this then takes us from translinguaging altogether: one might well challenge language practices that “reproduce inequalities” while remaining well within the confines of what listeners or readers are disposed to recognize as only English (or Spanish, etc.). The emphasis on the novelty of the discourse and subject here signals not so much a material accomplishment but, rather, an imagined removal (or escape, or break) from material social history.

We belabor this point to highlight what we see as a distinguishing feature of translingual theory: in contrast to those approaches emphasizing specific linguistic features, such as translinguaging and code-meshing—translingual theory emphasizes the social relations *of the language users to language*, with language itself the ongoing product of, and dependent on, their concrete and embodied labor. Raymond Williams has observed that “the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself [sic], himself in the fact of that kind of labour” (*Problems* 35). If we accept that languaging is work (albeit of a kind we are disposed not to recognize as work, or as “productive”), then language users perennially produce a sense of themselves in the fact of that work. Monolingualist ideology represents language users as mere “users” of something given to them, with the responsibility of then having to use it “correctly” or “properly” or “appropriately.” Language work, in this representation, thus becomes a matter of following orders, and language workers are those who follow such orders (or defy them). Those who engage in translinguaging (or code-meshing) might well still see themselves in this way, but enjoying the newly given “freedom” of choosing from an expanded range of options and combinations: not just English, or Spanish, or both, but a mixture, as they please, as well as the diversity of “resources” within “named languages” and other forms of expression. This freedom of choice, however, that the enlightened teacher may give students maintains their position as no more than consumers—savvier and more fortunate consumers, no doubt, but consumers nonetheless (of music videos, languages, identities, brands, modes). The agency exercised, in other words, is the agency of selection from predetermined options given or assigned to them.

By contrast, the translingual perspective we advance insists on shifting the sense of language use from consumption to production—even when the acts of production appear merely to exactly “reproduce” conventional forms. There is far less emphasis, or concern, with doing what is recognizably “new” (a hallmark demand of neoliberalism). Indeed, newness per se is from this perspective an irrelevant criterion—hence translingualism’s insistence on the inevitable newness,

phenomenologically, of every utterance, whatever forms are (re)iterated. Instead, there is an insistence on the role played by the concrete labor of every instance of writing and speaking, reading and listening in sustaining and revising any and all language, whether seemingly conventional or not, the social relations advanced through such usages, and the responsibility for contributing to such relations through ways of writing and speaking, reading and listening. The fact that much of that labor is likely to be directed toward maintaining those social relations currently obtaining does not make it any less productive, nor does it obviate the value of recognizing the role of language work in sustaining and, potentially, changing such relations, which are themselves basic productive forces (Williams, *Problems* 35). Language sedimentation is itself a never ending process. Utterances directed at maintaining existing social relations nonetheless change those social relations by rendering them reinforced and now obtaining in a different moment in time. The social relations “maintained” are thus different insofar as, through the labor of utterances, they have become further reinforced, like a path worn further by the steps of those following it.

The notion that language is work is not a new concept (see, for example, Rossi-Landi) but, rather, “basic Marxist theory” (Hickerson 695). Nonetheless, it is not a concept that has informed much of the recent attempts to rethink languages and their relation to users and contexts of use. Instead, thanks to the language ideology of monolingualism, language is imagined as a kind of property one either inherits or attempts to acquire, that one possesses (or not) and to which one does or does not have rights, including rights of use. In light of the venom directed at the languages of minoritized populations (as a means of directing venom at the populations themselves), language educators have reacted by defending those languages and language practices, whether in terms of language rights (e.g., the right to speak Spanish or Chinese or Navajo in the U.S.) or the value of novel uses made of these, e.g., translanguaging and code-meshing. As a consequence, those forms that we are predisposed by monolingualism to recognize as instances of creativity or resistance to monolingualist policy (because seemingly “new” or at odds with monolingualist policy) have garnered the most attention. This has led scholars like Matsuda to complain of a linguistic tourism that focuses on seemingly (from a monolingualist standpoint) exotic forms of writing (“Lure” 482-83). More damagingly, it has contributed to the commodification of language, denying the role played by language users’ concrete labor in maintaining and revising language. It has thereby contributed to the marginalization of the implications of the epistemological break we face regarding language, which now appears to be a phenomenon restricted to the language and language practices of minoritized populations, and therefore something that most of us—and particularly the dominant—can safely ignore.

Alternatively, by pulling out from beneath them the ontological rug on which monolingualist conceptions of language have stood, a translingual approach to language difference can force a change in social relations by its acknowledgement of labor. We can justify language and writing classes not as a means of either giving students the (premade) tools they need, or giving them voice (or their “freedom”—as gift by definition spurious), or producing a social utopia confined to the classroom. Instead, we can see such classes as occasions for taking up more deliberately that work on language that students are already inevitably and necessarily engaged in.

Claire Kramersch has observed of learners of a second/foreign language that

few of them are aware of the role they play as non-native speakers/actors in the life or death of a language, its development, its usage, its semiotic potential. . . . Learning a foreign language, with all the decentration, conflict, and discoveries this brings, is one of the more favorable academic means by which to restore to learners the discursive agency that they think they lack. (“Contrepoint” 322, our translation).²³

Thanks to monolingualism, almost all writers and speakers, “native” as well as not, believe they lack that same “discursive agency” that they in fact have (“la puissance d’agir discursive dont ils pensent manquer”). A translingual approach, then, would not attempt to gift them with such agency. Instead, it would use the classroom setting (official and unofficial) as an occasion for that agency to be acknowledged and exercised more consciously and deliberately, in the interest of rethinking, and potentially revising, social relations through such work—the work of language representation, as itself a language practice affecting subsequent language practice. Much of that work might well result in language forms that appear monolingual and conventional—there is, after all, a use to common practice, so long as it is recognized as no more than that, and hence always a work in progress. But it would be translingual in design. Students might well “learn English,” say, or written English, not as a given for their utterances to be measured against, but, in line with Kramsch, as a project to which both their learning and their utterances contribute.

This changes the social relations in the classroom, admittedly in ways more laborious and less appealing than offering students liberation. There are no predetermined or final results to expect the course to lead to, nor any gifts to distribute or exchange. And the discursive agency students exercise also comes with greater responsibility than following orders (i.e., responsibility for the social relations language practices contribute to maintaining or revising), surely less immediately appealing than mere license under the guise of freedom, or than being told what they need to do to get through another day. But this is simply a way to acknowledge what is already happening, and cannot stop from happening, in the work of writing and speaking, reading and listening, despite teachers’ and students’ worst/best efforts. In bringing into visibility what monolingualist ideology denies, translingual ideology forces a reconsideration of the kind of languaging all of us do, might, and should participate in, and why, with no recourse to “standards” to tell us what we have to do (Alvarez et al.) .

Defining translinguality in terms of an epistemological break with monolingualist notions of the ontology of language, the agency of users, and the social relations of language practice whereby languages preexists users, users are mere consumers of languages, and commodity consumer social relations prevail is not how translinguality is commonly understood, since it breaks with what monolingualist ideology has led us to understand breaks with monolingualist ideology to be: being “free” to use “different” languages and having the freedom to use them “differently” (as if it were possible to do otherwise). Understandably, then, translinguality is all too often conflated with little more than more tolerant versions of monolingualism that allow for, even celebrate, what monolingualism itself leads us to recognize as different, exotic, new. And, particularly under current circumstances, there is an urgency to arguments for tolerance of people and their languages and language practices that have been identified not only as different but “other,” “dangerous,” even “criminal.” It is difficult to do more

than react to growing, and increasingly officially sanctioned, expressions and actions of in-tolerance, racial and ethnic prejudice, discrimination, hatred, misogyny, and violence.

But it would be a mistake to be only reactive. Proactively, we need to reject the legitimacy of the very terms of the arguments made in defense of such intolerance. In the case of language prejudice and discrimination, we need to redefine all language as the continuing outcome of our collective ongoing labor, dependent on that labor for its continued viability. There is no “there” in language to defend, only a work in perpetual progress. To invocations to “speak English,” we can ask “What English, made how, and why, toward what ends, when?” (Alvarez; Horner, “Teaching”; Horner and Tetreault; Lu and Horner, “Translingual Literacy”). And these are questions that, quite rightly, we can pursue with our students as well. It is work that is necessary, that we’re all already doing, that requires everyone’s participation, and that therefore we can and should take up more deliberately.

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NOTES

¹ Further complications arise from differences between francophone and anglophone research traditions on plurilinguality (see Moore and Gajo).

² This is not to dismiss such work, which especially in Liu brings out the problematics of translation that such movement precipitates and entails.

³ For a close analysis and critique of Kubota's argument, see Blommaert's "Superdiversity."

⁴ For comparable arguments, see, for example, the special issue of *Applied Linguistics* devoted to the emergence of "trans" perspectives in language theories and practices (Hawkins and Mori), Blommaert and Rampton's account of recent paradigm shifts ("Language and Superdiversity" 3ff.), and Canagarajah's argument that translinguality constitutes a "paradigm shift" from monolingualist orientations (*Translingual Practice* 6).

⁵ For other accounts of the growing number of terms emerging to make sense of language difference, see Canagarajah, "Translanguaging"; Li Wei, "Translanguaging as a Practical," Gevers; Lu, "Metaphors."

⁶ A term that has been highly contested (see Flores and Lewis).

⁷ For a fuller analysis of facets of monolingualism as language ideology and its politics, see Yildiz; Watson and Shapiro.

⁸ And far earlier (1957), Jose Y Ortega Gasset proclaimed,

what [linguistics] calls "language" really has no existence, it is a utopian and artificial image constructed by linguistics itself. In effect, language is never a "fact" for the simple reason that it is never an "accomplished fact" but is always making and unmaking itself, or, to put it in other terms, it is a permanent creation and a ceaseless destruction. Hence precisely the splendid intellectual achievement represented by linguistics as it is constituted today obliges it (*noblesse oblige*) to attain a second and more precise and forceful approximation in its knowledge of the reality, "language." And this it can do only if it studies language not as an accomplished fact, as a thing made and finished, but as in the process of being made. (242)

⁹ Of course, the degree to which current communicative practices are somehow more mixed (linguistically and/or otherwise) than previously is questionable. On this, see, for example, Blommaert, "Complexity" 618; Trimbur and Press, "When"; Canagarajah, "Translanguaging" 3-4; and Yildiz.

¹⁰ Glissant explains, "I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him" (*Poetics* 193).

¹¹ This is in addition to the common ascription of language differences to specific social groups in light of their social status regardless of any actual linguistic features of their utterances.

¹² The same may be said of increasingly common invocations of language users' "repertoires," understood as resources they "have" that users can choose to deploy in various ways that do not alter the constitution of those resources—invocations rehearsing the kind of cloisonné model of language critiqued by Bernabé et al., but here ascribed to individuals.

¹³ Blommaert is not invoking the term *translingual* here (a term he treats as suspect), but we see his representation of language as in accord with the labor perspective on language we are advancing.

¹⁴ Calvet 6. See also Pennycook, *Language as a Local Practice*.

¹⁵ On the necessity of recognizing the norm of opacity to communicative acts, see Bernabé et al. 113, and Glissant, “For Opacity.”

¹⁶ Though Otheguy et al. see all speakers, including those deemed monolingual as well as those deemed bilingual, engaging in translanguaging, their concern is with the latter insofar as, in terms of their framework, the latter are prevented from engaging as freely in translanguaging as monolinguals are (297).

¹⁷ Blackledge et al. and Otheguy et al. do acknowledge the “mixing” of registers, etc. “within” a single named language as also constituting translanguaging, or “flexible bilingualism” (Blackledge et al. 192-93; Otheguy et al. 297). There is also, of course, dismissal of language practices as subnormal by the dominant, e.g., by those groups deemed subnormal, such as the language practices of African Americans and of those identified as white but residents of the US Appalachians.

¹⁸ Cf. Blackledge et al.’s argument that “the questions we need to ask are not limited to which languages are in use in an interaction and why. We also need to attend to the ways in which linguistic resources are deployed in our societies and how this deployment of linguistic resources reproduces, negotiates, and contests social difference and social inequality” (193).

¹⁹ While both García and Leiva are identified as the co-authors of the article, the article presents the speaker as “I,” and that speaker describes Leiva’s teaching using the third person (“Camila,” “she,” “her”); hence we alternate between representing the article’s authorship as plural and representing the presentation of the article’s argument as García’s. We apologize for any confusion.

²⁰ Hence Canagarajah’s caution against the romanticizing of translanguaging (“Translanguaging” 4-5).

²¹ For an early but useful critique of the limitations of this posture in critical and feminist pedagogy, see Gore, “What We Can Do for You!”

²² See Canagarajah’s caution about scholarship treating multilingual communication as “more diverse, dynamic, and democratic than ‘monolingual’ competence,” and his call to “adopt a critical attitude towards the resources/limitations and prospects/challenges of translanguaging” (“Translanguaging” 3).

²³ “Peu d’apprenants ont conscience du rôle qu’ils jouent en tant que locuteurs/acteurs non-natifs sur la vie ou la mort d’une langue, son développement, son usage, son potentiel sémiotique. . . . L’apprentissage d’une langue étrangère, avec tout ce qu’elle apporte de décentration, de conflit et de découvertes, est une des matières scolaires les plus propices à . . . redonner aux apprenants la puissance d’agir discursive dont ils pensent manquer.” Thanks to Christiane Donahue for assistance in translating this passage.

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Between Learning and Opportunity: A Study of African American Coders' Networks of Support

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KEYWORDS

ecological writing studies; critical race theory; coding literacy; ego network analysis;
racially marginalized digital literacies

Despite the ubiquity of digital technologies in the United States, racially marginalized adults are still less likely to develop high quality digital literacy skills for meaningful problem-solving practices (Reeder 16). Racial disparities between Whites and African Americans in health, education, income, and mass incarceration (Geronimus et al. 826, 833; Sentencing Project; M. Jones 150–51; Martin, Fasching-Varner, and Pulley) can exacerbate the unequal use of these technologies and prevent racially marginalized people from accessing the multiple resources that may ensure that their learning digital literacies afford “full participation” in life opportunities” (Warschauer and Tate 69).

The expected benefits of digital literacy echo the historical ideological belief that reading and writing are necessary to accrue progress both for civilization and individuals, what Harvey Graff calls the literacy myth (Graff, *The Literacy Myth*; Graff and Duffy 41). The literacy myth interprets literacy as a useful skill free of the messiness of political and cultural ideology. This myth persists and extends into digital technology: the digital divide is a dichotomy between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not. The digital version of the literacy myth suggests that if given physical access to digital technology, racially marginalized people can overcome inequality and have full participation in life.

However, scholars in writing studies have found literacy a socially constructed practice whose consequences vary among people as a result of cultural and political interests (Street 2; Graff, “The Literacy Myth at Thirty”). Understanding literacy as a social practice, a range of scholars in composition and rhetoric have called for a more nuanced discussion on digital divide rhetoric and education policy (Banks 41; Selfe; Moran 206). Annette Powell, for example, argues that we look deeper than mere physical access to digital technology and “recognize [the] social, political, and economic factors implicated in the literacies individuals bring to technology and the circumstances under which these literacies are deployed” (17). How racially marginalized people access and use digital technologies is an *on-going process* deeply affected by their social conditions (Powell 17). Virginia Eubanks notes that we consider that digital technology “an assembly of practices for organizing the world that encode some norms, values, and ways of life at the expense of others”

(25). Rather than teaching a skill set, digital literacy education should build awareness of how social location, citizenship, and surveillance play a role in how marginalized people interact with technological systems (Eubanks 25, 30).

Computer code bootcamps offer a unique context for further research on the social and material conditions that influence marginalized communities' access to emerging technologies and the realistic, complicated consequences of those processes of access. These bootcamps emerged from an ongoing nationwide campaign for giving all youth, especially underrepresented youth, opportunities to learn programming in public schools, as coding may be the new necessary literacy for everyday life (Smith; Treene; Bramson; McGowan; Bruckman et al. 86; Guzdial 10). Assisting in this goal to make coding literacy more accessible, computer code bootcamps offer rapid and short-term (approximately twelve weeks or less) training courses in web or app development for, in some cases, low-income racially marginalized people. Some bootcamps that meet in person require students to dedicate thirty-two to forty hours per week to learning coding, leaving students with less time for tending to other life responsibilities such as work and taking care of loved ones. The results of this intense training present a new coding literacy myth: an imagined future in which coding literacy education addresses digital racial inequality, helps low-income people of color have a lucrative career in software development, and evolves the tech industry into a more culturally inclusive space.

However, my qualitative study shows how conditions on the ground actually play out as twelve African American adults attend a code bootcamp in the Midwest and become educated under the regimes of white supremacy. I asked participants to draw detailed maps of support illustrating the various kinds of internal and external support that they relied on as they progressed through the bootcamp. I then conducted one-on-one interviews about their maps of support, asking participants to explain how those kinds of support assisted in their learning coding literacy. Using principles of ego network analysis (ENA) to analyze these maps and interviews about these maps, I was able to learn that participants called on these various clusters of support in their network to provide the personal resources coders need to code and what is hard to come by in situations of racial injustice. Because participants learned coding literacy under drastically different sociomaterial conditions, each participant seemed to follow a unique process of gathering their resources. For this reason, I describe in this article three loosely connected example resources that shaped participants' learning of coding: emotional investment, temporary time and space, and mind/body preparation.

INTEGRATING ECOLOGICAL WRITING AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

This study is grounded in ecological theories of writing and critical race theory. Ecological theories of writing seek to “understand how networked people experience multiple encounters with a variety of other people, texts, and objects over time” (Laquintano and Vee 53). In this new materialist formulation, writers are enmeshed in, and not the center of, a complex, constantly evolving system of relationships between the social and the material (Cooper 371–72; Alexis 84–85; Syverson 23). Qualitative studies have investigated writing ecologies from a variety of angles. For

example, Cydney Alexis conducted a qualitative study on writing habitats and how objects in writers' preferred locations for writing mediate those writers' literate activity. And, more recently, Yvonne Teems teased out the ways we can learn about how older adults' writing ecologies shape their literacy practices for accommodating aging.

However, writing ecologies can implicate large macro-level forces that bring materials into our literate lives. In her chapter describing writing habitats, Alexis writes, "These habitats are constructed *for us* when we are young . . . we construct our own spaces in which to work that often echo the spaces of our early learning" (84–85). Jumping off from writing habitats, I'm curious about how the space and objects that make up habitats where one learns literacy indicate privilege; in other words, how have economic disparities among racial groups helped to construct the places where learning happens? For example, in his digital literacy life history interview, twenty-seven-year-old Kevin, one of the participants in my study, explained he had spent part of his childhood moving from one place to the next in the South and the Southwest regions of the United States. During his travels, Kevin saw his family go from owning a home to renting apartments due to financial stress. Kevin said he enjoyed tinkering with the family desktop as one way to learn problem-solving; this experience played some role in his digital literacy learning. However, the kinds of materials for literacy learning Kevin owned and interacted with depended on his family's mobility. How might have Kevin's digital literacy learning be different had his family sold the desktop for extra money?

Critical race theory offers directions for studying the ways structural racism influences the construction of writing ecologies. A method for uncovering and challenging systemic racism, critical race theory, in part, shows that "anti-black attitudes and practices" (Ture and Hamilton 5) fuse into institutional policies and norms that create "inherited disadvantages" in "access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society" (C. P. Jones 10). However, literacy studies has not sufficiently integrated critical race theory into its scholarship. Carmen Kynard observes that considerations of the social context of literacy have involved methods from other disciplines, such as anthropology and history. But literacy studies has not adopted a racial perspective that explains how "deep political and ideological shifts . . . have left structured inequalities and violence" in place (Kynard 64). In her review on critical race theory and literacy, Arlette Ingram Willis also notes that literacy studies has neglected adopting a race-conscious method of analysis to have "adequate discussions that address economic and social inequities, historically and in contemporary contexts that give rise to unequal access and opportunities for literacy learning: homelessness, immigrant and citizenship status, and poverty" (23).

Bringing ecological theories of writing and critical race theory together may be productive

for writing studies scholars, as this intersection might direct our attention to how marginalized communities' interactions with people and the materials of writing systems are also interactions with white supremacy. When literacy scholars use a race-conscious lens to study the writing ecologies of Black communities, they can consider that the materials available to these and other marginalized communities are not mere givens but rather the products of well-thought out historical formulas of institutional oppression. For example, the abundance of white and male software developers in the tech industry, I would argue, can be partly linked to the observation that white children and their families can access better resources to computer science education than Black/African American children (Margolis 81). In the Coding for All movement, many afterschool programs rectify this unequal access and use of coding literacy. Black Girls Code and Maydm both introduce youth of color and girls to computer science in hopes of inspiring and cultivating their interest in seeing themselves as coders. Meanwhile, for young racially marginalized adults, computer code bootcamps such as Yes We Code and Hack the Hood offer direct access to the material and social resources of coding literacy and possible careers in software development.

Taking critical race theory and ecological writing ecologies together, I understand that adults in computer code bootcamps learn a new prestigious literacy practice in the midst of a complicated system of inherited disadvantages that shape how they learn computer programming. I uncover in this article how the *learning practices* of participants are embedded in material and nonmaterial systems that they have devised for themselves. I analyze how the space, time, objects, and bodies that participants name as part of their networks, even if mentioned in passing, cohere as a *necessary response* to generational racial disparities that may impact how they learn coding literacy.

CONTEXT

Clearwater Academy is a career training program attached to a larger non-profit organization that offers to the local community a variety of services to end racism and economic disparities. As a method for achieving these goals, Clearwater teaches low-income people of color and women web development (HTML, CSS, and JavaScript).¹ For three and a half months, students attend classes four days a week, eight hours a day, learning how to design and code websites individually, in pairs programming, and in teams. Two-thirds of the class teaches soft skills: students write and workshop cover letters and resumés, present elevator pitches, and practice mock job interviews. They also listen to invited speakers and have one-on-one conferences with industry mentors on a variety of job-, finance-, and tech-related topics. This extensive training may help adults gain paid internships or fulltime employment in the local tech industry.

Students at Clearwater Academy do not pay tuition, but they do have emotional and physical challenges that determine how well they learn programming. Learning coding literacy is a long process for students as they juggle many burdens, so Clearwater offers to help students with life challenges: passing out free bus passes and gas cards, paying one month's rent, and referring students to social services that can help with other concerns. However, Clearwater has these resources in limited supply. One study participant, Patricia, noted in an interview conducted later in the Fall 2017

semester that Clearwater no longer had “any funds to help you with rent, utilities, stuff like that.” Clearwater is an incomplete sponsor for participants living *between* the realities of their everyday lives and a possibly equitable future; *between* the systemic racial stratification that governs their lives and the opportunity to achieve social mobility using coding literacy. Because Clearwater has limited resources to help students in this “between space,” participants find other resources to stay in the code bootcamp while managing life challenges associated with oppression.

To understand life between learning and opportunity, I conducted a year-long IRB- approved ethnographic study at Clearwater, beginning in Spring 2017, that included participant observation and interviews. I recruited twelve participants ranging in ages twenty-one to fifty-six between the spring and fall semesters. Six students identified as female and six as male. Seven of the twelve participants self-identified as African American; two participants were biracial but identified themselves African American. One participant explained that he was Afro-Latinx, but his life experiences, he noted, grounded him in the everyday lives of the Black diaspora. Unfortunately, at the halfway point of the spring semester, one participant left Clearwater due to poverty and childcare needs. Thus, I present data based on eleven out of twelve study participants.

To return participants’ generosity, I offered to tutor all students, not just study participants, with job-related writing assignments. Richard, the coding instructor, and Janet, the soft skills instructor, welcomed my helping students write elevator pitches and cover letters and judge their final presentations and portfolios. To learn programing, students completed exercises in HTML, CSS, and JavaScript on an interactive website. I myself completed several exercises on this website to get a sense of what the students experienced. I later helped students work through some of these coding challenges. In this way, I built rapport with participants and their classmates.

METHODS

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to understand the broader literacy contexts participants inhabited, I asked participants to draw a map of their support,² the people and objects in their lives that helped them keep learning coding literacy despite racial disparities. Studies of literacies may concern themselves with the direct interaction with literacy practice and its context. In this article, however, a network of support asks that we stretch even further back before literacy practice happens, to the combination of interactions with people, objects, thoughts, and emotions that may jumpstart literate activity. I use ego network analysis as a tool for understanding how these interactions and relationships participate and make possible this leap into coding literacy. In the context of a computer code bootcamp training low-income people of color, then, I asked participants to document and tell stories about the people, emotions, objects, and past experiences that circulate in their personal lives that helped them *approach* Clearwater as a literacy sponsor possessing the social (e.g. tech industry mentors) and physical (e.g. laptops) materials used for learning coding literacy. Analysis of the interviews and maps considers the quality of the participants’ interactions and how those interactions impact other pieces in the networks in pursuit of supporting their learning.

Using maps to understand networks of support traces back to previous studies that used drawing to help researchers understand literacy practices (Brooke and McIntosh 134–41; Prior and Shipka 182–86; Mason 96–102). For a computer code bootcamp that moves quickly through content, maps allowed me to see more clearly what events, objects, and people impact code bootcamp students' learning coding literacy. They also provided a response to the time constraints of participant observation and interviews. Because both methods of data collection are confined to place and a time limit, depending on the responsibilities participants in my study had, details maybe limited or

“With maps, participants and I can fold the distance and time that seems in short supply during interviews and observation by writing a range of items on the page. Participants can then demonstrate their agency to name what matters to them in their sociomaterial conditions and describe how those items work, or don’t work, in their lives.”

details maybe difficult to follow up on.

With maps, participants and I can fold the distance and time that seems in short supply during interviews and observation by writing a range of items on the page. Participants can then demonstrate their agency to name what matters to them in their sociomaterial conditions and describe how those items work, or don't work, in their lives.

In these interviews and maps,

participants provided rich details on how these networks created useful resources for them.

Frequently used across disciplines such as sociology, communication, and economics, ego network analysis (ENA) understands “network” as a complex web of social interactions and social relations. ENA looks at an “individual’s social environment” rather than their specific attributions (e.g. race, class, gender) for “explanations, whether through influence processes (e.g., individuals adopting their friends’ occupational choices) or leveraging processes (e.g., an individual can get certain things done because of the connections she has to powerful others)” (Borgatti et al. 894). The interviewees named in their network are called “alters.”³ Areas for analysis include the number of people in an individual’s network, how those people relate to one another, and the strength of the relationship among the individual and people (Prell 8). These areas are often visualized quantitatively (e.g. charts, digraphs, or Bernoulli graphs) (Prell 9 –18; Marin and Wellman 21–22; Provan and Milward 4–12). In this way, researchers understand macro-level patterns based on the kinds of behaviors, knowledge, and resources that arise out of the networks (Marin and Wellman 13).

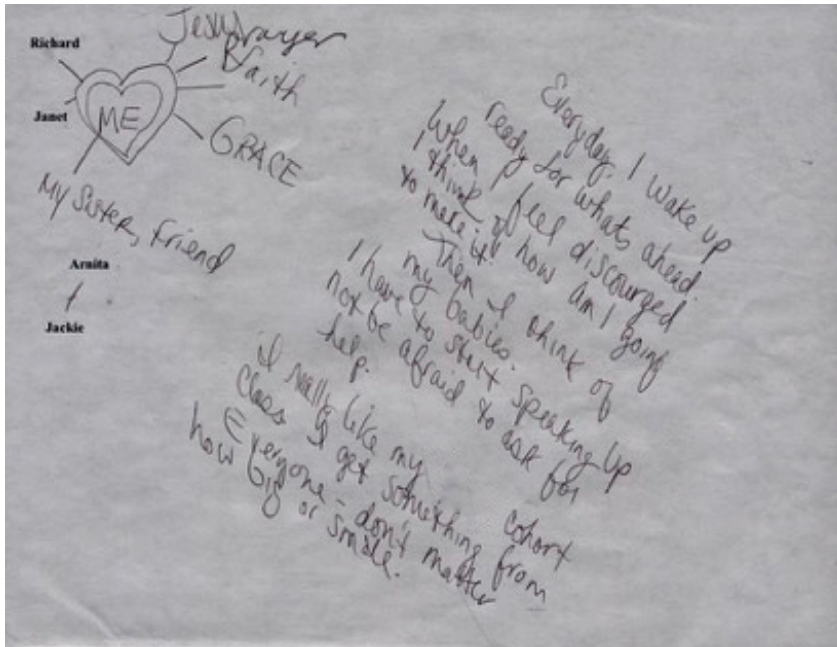


Figure 1. Patricia's heart-shaped network and reflection.

Patricia's map (Figure 1) serves as a useful example. When asked to discuss her network of support and the ways they assisted in her learning coding, Patricia drew one heart inside the other; the outer heart represents a layer of protection made of several essential people: Richard, the class's technical skills instructor; Janet, the class's soft skills instructor; Jesus; Patricia's "sister" and "friend" Arnita; and Jackie, another friend from church, and Jesus. Notice that Patricia's network also includes two abstract concepts—faith and grace. As an extension of her map, Patricia reflects in writing, "Every day I wake up ready for what's ahead. When I feel discouraged, I think of how I am going to make it. Then I think of my [grandchildren]. I have to start speaking up [and] not be afraid to ask for help. I really like my . . . cohort class. I get something from everyone—don't matter how big or small." As with other participants, Patricia drew her map as she saw fit and included her reflection unprompted. Patricia was given the agency to interpret "network of support" in a way that made sense to her, and she was given the agency to name the boundaries of her social reality and the actors within it. And through writing and the interview, Patricia authored the values and resources that comes out of that network.

ENA provides a systematic analytical approach that expands ways of studying writing systems. However, it often relies on participants naming *specific people*. This anthropocentrism is the antithesis of ecological writing, which decenters the writer from literacy practice and sees them participating in the circulation of material (e.g. desks, pencils, writing) and non-material (e.g. emotion) objects. ENA and ecological writing theory address one another's limitations and help include the total

sociomaterial experiences of study participants. I extend “network,” as understood in ego network analysis, to further include the objects and places participants noted in their interview.

After drawing their maps, each participant explained the person, object, or pet on the map that helped them with coding. Follow-up questions during our conversations deepened the specificity of those answers. I conducted and recorded these thirty-five to sixty minutes interviews on the Clearwater Academy campus during lunch or extended breaks; one interview was conducted over video chat. Although this participant, Alice, drew her map during the video chat, I was unable to collect the map. However, I took copious notes during our conversation. In my first round of analysis, I did open coding, which involved creating a chart that listed each participant’s set of named alters and then assigning each alter to a support type (cognitive, affective, financial, or physical). These types arose from how participants discussed each alter on their map. Frequently, participants named how and what kinds of resources the different alters provided, which helped avoid any ambiguity in categorizing the different support types. In moments when participants were not more direct, I inferred from the transcripts the potential resources alters provided. I briefly summarized the interactions participants had with each alter, extracting sample comments from the transcriptions as evidence. In a final category, I described in one or two sentences the resources that resulted from that interaction.

During the second round of analysis, I revisited the initial descriptions of the resources and the type of support they provided for accuracy and refining the language based on reexamination of the maps and interviews. Finally, in the third round of analysis, I conducted closed coding, examining how alters in each network related to one another based on the resources provided. Alters that provided similar resources and had the most influence on participants’ learning of programming and their relationships with others, according to the interviews, became the core theme of each network. I used the support types and resource descriptions to create names that summarized the most dominant kind of resource (see “Resources from Networks” in Table 1). I also counted the number of possible connections in each participant’s network see “Number of Alters” and “Number of Possible Relations” in Table 1). The number of alters identified and the number possible interactions suggest the strength of participants’ networks of support (Hanneman and Riddle 341-44) to address the possible consequences (e.g. homelessness, fewer work hours, loss of wages) of attending a computer code bootcamp full time. These numbers underscore how each participant address shared life challenges resulting from racial inequality in various ways depending on their sociomaterial circumstances.

I resisted comparing participants’ themes to establish a theory, following ecological writing theory’s argument that systems are so complex and unique that comparing systems does not help us accurately understand writing. I applied the same principle to this ecological view of literacy learning. Moreover, the comparison would flatten the unique experiences each study participant described on their maps and in their interviews. Although we see similar resources across participant maps in Table 1, the interactions described in each network varied. Thus, I provide a discussion of three individual networks as a result of those individuals’ interviews and maps. Keisha, Kevin, and DeAndre’s stories offer rich details on how they interacted with their networks and the resources

those interactions generated. These participants also serve as example of similar networks for other participants as well. Keisha's network is an example of the emotional investment that Paul, Isaiah, and Alex gather from their networks while Kevin's detailed explanation of how negotiating for time and space to practice computer coding mirrors the experiences of Alice and Rosie's ways of getting time to work on coding. Finally, DeAndre's use of marijuana and music typifies the ways networks help the body prepare for activating coding literacy learning, as seen in Zelda, Patricia, and Zeus' similar efforts to deal with the physical demands of coding.

Table 1. Participants' Quantified Network Strengths and Description of Network Resources.

Participants	Number of Alters Identified	Number of Possible Relations	Resources from Networks
Keisha	11	13	Emotional Investment
Paul	7	11	Emotional Investment
Alex	7	10	Stability
Kevin	7	9	Temporary Space and Time
Zeus	8	9	Embodied Self-Discipline
Isaiah	5	8	Emotional Investment
DeAndre	6	8	Body/Mind Preparation
Alice	7	8	Temporary Space and Time
Zelda	8	8	Body/Mind Preparation
Patricia	6	7	Strength in Body to Work
Rosie	8	7	Secure Time

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I discuss and analyze three case studies—Keisha, Kevin, and DeAndre. I describe the sociomaterial risks that may have forced them to quit Clearwater Academy, ending their efforts to learn coding literacy. I offer detailed analysis on how participants interacted with various actors (e.g. people, objects, and institutions) to continue learning coding in response to these risks. The collection of interactions, I argue, develop into personal resources coders need to code and what is

hard to come by in situations of racial injustice.

Keisha: Emotional Investment

In her map (Figure 2), Keisha, a thirty-four-year-old certified nursing assistant, demonstrated during the interview that her most important alters for emotional investment were her daughter

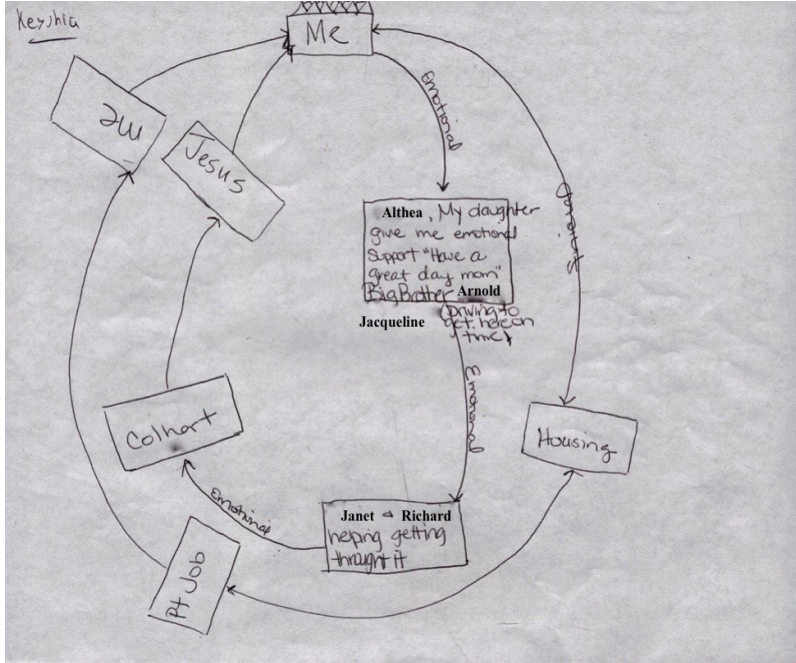


Figure 2. Keisha’s network as two spirals.

and siblings, Clearwater’s technical skills and soft skills instructors, classmates, and, finally, Jesus. She wrote these alters on a circle, suggesting that she rotates among them for different kinds of emotional support before returning to Clearwater prepared to learn programming. The outer ring names material conditions that assist in stabilizing the inner ring of the map. In other words, living in an affordable home and having a part-time job set a strong foundation for accessing emotional resources from Keisha’s most important alters. She could not receive inspiration from her daughter, for example, if she could not use government assistance and a salary from her reduced hours to protect her daughter’s own well-being.

Keisha drew herself at the top (“Me”) because she had control over many decisions in her own life before attending Clearwater. She “lived at work” as a certified nursing assistant, working from 6am to 8pm throughout the week. Keisha works this hard for two reasons: First, she had been homeless before, and “it was not pretty. They [homelessness and poverty] are the most ugliest things I saw.” In fact, Keisha explained, that experience had given her “a fear of being broke” again. Second, Keisha uses most of her income for her daughter, Althea, a lesson she had learned from her mother, who also spent all her money on Keisha and her siblings, especially during Christmas. Thus, Keisha

relies on herself to stay afloat.

However, Keisha's decision to attend Clearwater Academy endangers her position as the central person of her network. Participants must attend class Monday through Thursday for eight hours a day. Because most of her weekdays are spent at the code bootcamp, Keisha has less time to work. Reducing her work hours impacts her ability to pay rent, utilities, and food. The consequences of this could be severe for her emotionally: While coding a tribute webpage to Althea in HTML and CSS, Keisha explained that she "had never been this broke before" and began to cry. In addition, Keisha's family disagrees with her choice to attend Clearwater Academy. They believe Keisha is irresponsible for reducing her work hours to learn web development. For example, Keisha's mother also believes trading work for a literacy that may never reap rewards is dangerous. How will she support herself and her daughter? At the beginning of the semester, Keisha's boyfriend offered to help pay bills and other expenses; however, he later wanted her to leave Clearwater, finding it a waste of time and financially risky. When she refused, he stopped helping pay rent and blocked Keisha from using his credit cards. Keisha explained during our interview that other family members *expect* her to quit the code bootcamp because they know her to be "a starter but not a finisher." With financial difficulties on one side and a reticent family on the other, Keisha is always at risk of losing emotional and material control over her life. Nevertheless, emotional investment as a personal resource helps Keisha maintain her motivation to learn coding despite the anxiety and stress of family and work, which I will now detail below.

To keep herself grounded in her pursuit of coding literacy, Keisha draws on different kinds of emotional labor. For example, Keisha admitted that she "puts on a front" in class—she smiles and jokes with her classmates, pretending that her life is okay. "And ninety percent of the time," she thinks going to Clearwater is the right decision for her. However, "some days I be pissed off that I'm here. But a lot of days, I don't. A lot of days I definitely don't be pissed off that I'm here. Cause it gives me a purpose." Not graduating is "when I would [feel] like all of this was for nothing. And I refuse to start over because then I get that look [from family]." Keisha demonstrates the emotional labor required to navigate life circumstances and stay committed to coding in a computer code bootcamp. She isn't so much proving her family wrong to avoid more comments on leaving yet another project unfinished; instead, Keisha seems to draw on her family's doubts and the potential negative consequences of failure as a source of motivation for learning coding literacy. This redirection helps Keisha maintain the control she once had over her life since before attending Clearwater.

Keisha uses the other alters in her network to ground her emotional investment in learning coding. For example, her daughter Althea reminds Keisha of her Christian faith to supplement the emotional labor of learning coding despite the temptation to return to work and fix her financial problems. "She tells me every morning, 'Have a great day.' And she's proud of me." Althea also plays the same gospel song every morning on a speaker. During our interview, Keisha could not remember the song and searched frantically for it on YouTube, a sign that she valued her daughter's presence each morning. While her daughter wishes Keisha well every day, Keisha herself prays every morning, "'God, let me be great today.' No matter what it is. Whatever I decide to do, even if I decide to go back to my job or Lord, please let me get a job offer, I'm bound to be great." Althea reminds Keisha

why learning coding matters. From her well wishes and music, Keisha gathers the strength and resolve to attend Clearwater every day. She also builds confidence that Clearwater is a right decision: God provided the coding bootcamp as a blessing, and despite the challenges while learning coding, God planned to provide Keisha something. This faith in God strengthens Keisha's commitment to learning programming.

Despite drawing on her Christian faith and her daughter to help stabilize her emotional life, Keisha cannot stave off doubt completely, and for that Richard, Clearwater's technical instructor, and Janet, the project coordinator, work to convince Keisha that she *is the great person* she had prays to be. Three days into the code bootcamp, Keisha explained, "I would've been gone. I know me. I wouldn't've stayed this long." In the first three weeks, Keisha wanted to return to a livable wage, a path out of coding and back to some stability. But Richard and Janet suggested that Keisha not downplay herself. Making herself less important has always been Keisha's default attitude, even when she was growing up. Keisha's mother went on trips with boyfriends, leaving Keisha to look after her younger brothers and sisters. As an adult, she still supported her younger siblings, sacrificing her own needs to see that they succeeded in their own education and careers. What made Keisha stay despite these experiences and desires? For the first two weeks at Clearwater, Richard and Janet insisted that learning coding was worth her time and reduced wages. She didn't believe them. But then the three-week review of her academic progress came. "[The review] said 'You are encouraging. You make people worth coming to this class.' So I stayed." Richard and Janet had acknowledged that she made a positive impact on her classmates, recognition that, as Keisha had noted, she rarely received from family.

Government assistance brought some stability to Keisha's finances, as well which helps Keisha recover her self-sufficient. Keisha pays \$600 in rent each month, but because Clearwater Academy requires so much of her time during the week, Keisha can only work nine hours a month, making about \$400. She later received a five-day notice for not paying full rent. But "by the grace of God [the landlord] took the letter that Janet had wrote for my acceptance letter" and got a section 8 voucher from the federal government that "dropped my rent down to zero." Keisha still pays for food and other utilities; nevertheless, that government assistance further protects her will to learn coding. Although Keisha had written "Housing" underneath financial support in her map, having the voucher offers her emotional relief from the burden of not having enough money to pay rent. Like the three-week review from Richard and Janet, the voucher gives Keisha less of a reason to delay or end her attempt at learning coding.

Keisha named other alters in her network, like her sister who drives her to Clearwater and her older brother who encourages her to keep going to class. But most significant are the ways resources from other alters allows Keisha to claim greater emotional investment in learning programming. The combination of faith in God's provision, the presence of her daughter, the encouraging observations about her personality and contribution to the academic and emotional well-being of her classmates, and even doubts that she wouldn't finish, leads to securing the motivation to learn programming. Keisha's experience shows that learning coding at a bootcamp involves a great deal of emotional labor. Frequently, the emotions of African Americans, especially Black women, can be misinterpreted,

disrespected, oversimplified, or ignored (Richardson; Carey), as if Black women do not have a right to complex feelings in a world of white supremacy. A curriculum that centers coding literacy as a skill rather than the holistic well-being of its students runs the risk of perpetuating disrespect of Black bodies. However, as I mentioned earlier, a coding program that tends to the affect of its adult students may help support student learning and provide a pathway to staying on track with coding literacy learning. Instructors and other support staff unknowingly operate alongside a host of other alters within students' lives. To be further aware of these other pieces allows for deeper, more meaningful efforts to balance the demands of a computer code bootcamp with the burdens of its adult students.

Kevin: Temporary Time and Space

Twenty-nine-year-old Kevin's map (Figure 3) shows that his support produces two resources: emotional well-being from family, friends, and his dogs in the Southwest region of the United States where Kevin is from; and accumulating temporary time and space, from housemates and a non-profit he volunteers for. Emotional well-being is a long-distance personal resource as it travels across the country to Kevin through telecommunication, his fond memories of his dogs, and his own goals to return home and find a good job after graduating from Clearwater. However, Kevin's alters in the Midwest offers the most help to his accessing ways of learning coding literacy. While Kevin wrote on his map that he receives assistance, encouragement, and friendship from his classmates, "work around school and homework" from his housemates and the youth program Kevin volunteers for are especially essential to his learning coding. Taken together, these two types of alters helped "bend reality" and offer him more time and space. Gathering extra time and temporary space leads to Kevin getting a brief reprieve from life responsibilities that might have prevented him from doing well in Clearwater Academy. I explore this point in-depth in the following section.

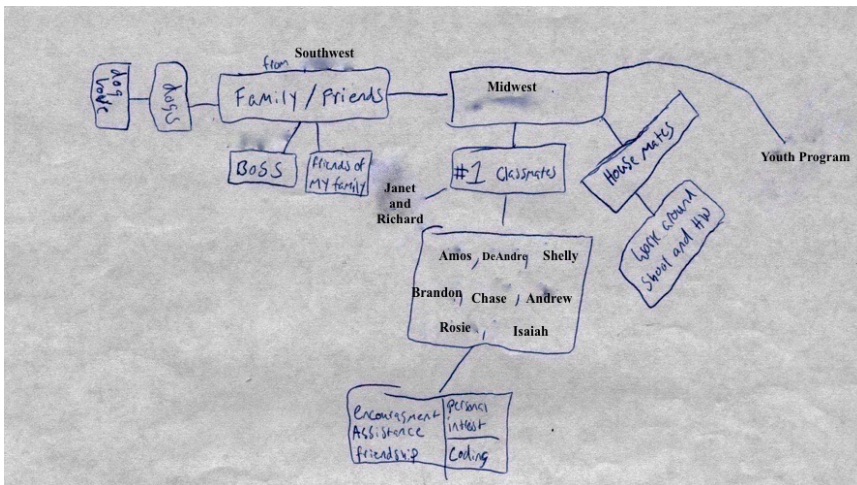


Figure 3. Kevin's network of support comes from two regions of the United States.

To understand the value of getting more time and space for coding literacy, it's important to first

envison the circumstances in which Kevin learns programming. When he arrived in the Midwest, Kevin moved into cooperative housing, where he and his housemates shared chores, food, and bills. Because co-ops serve low-income residents, Kevin's expenses total at most 40 dollars each month. Nevertheless, Kevin works as a deli chef and as a bouncer to get a little extra income. On top of these two jobs, he fit into his schedule volunteering at a non-profit organization. Kevin attends Clearwater 32 hours a week, but classwork often follows him home, taking up time he could use for work, family, friends, and self-care. Thus, coding became the center of Kevin's life, and other responsibilities circulated around coding. Despite these challenges, Kevin's classmates and instructors get the impression that learning coding comes easy for him. They didn't realize that understanding coding isn't a snap for Kevin. Much of what he learns from them at Clearwater Academy he later refines elsewhere. "Dude, no I don't [learn web development quick]," he said during our interview. "Everything we did in class is what I do when I go home . . . I work on this shit. And I do it the whole time . . . And I'm doing this until 11 and then I go to bed."

At home, Kevin negotiates for time and space to make his success at coding possible. For example, asking his housemates to "[let] me work around my school schedule and school work, with household chores, so long as I actually do stuff" is the best way to work many hours at home. Kevin called his housemates his "helpmeet," partly because they often ask if they could do anything for him and sometimes connect Kevin to potential clients for freelance web design jobs. When Kevin has too many assignments to do, but it's also his turn to clean the bathroom, housemates volunteer to do his chores for him. "They be like, "This time I'll do it and you'll just take mine next week, or something, *when you have more time*' . . . Obviously, I have to do it but I don't have to do it at that second."

His housemates, then, are not just a helpmeet but partners in his coding work. They sacrifice time they could use for their own responsibilities to give more time to Kevin. He can then keep up with Clearwater Academy's work and also execute the lessons he learns from his classmates. With work at the grocery store and the downtown bar encroaching even further on Kevin's ability to commit to deep, sustained practice on coding, his housemates are even more essential to time accumulation. Kevin quite literally soaks up his housemates' time for himself, so he has a different relationship with the evening hours after returning from Clearwater Academy.

Finding additional spaces from his network to learning coding overlaps with accumulating additional time. During the interview, Kevin describe his bedroom as "a little Japanese room" with a bed, a night stand, a hamper for clothes. But he "literally [has] one walkway. Two people in there would be way too much." Kevin is tall and muscular. Because his room has space for one person, trying to work on coding over long stretches of time can be uncomfortable. He needs isolation to focus, so the house's living room or kitchen would not help either. Recognizing the discomfort of Kevin's small bedroom and the need for isolation, his housemates offer him their bedrooms as workspaces. "They're just like, 'Hey, I'm going to be gone for the weekend. If you need to use my room, you can. Like it's cool,'" Kevin explained. The housemate would then put clean sheets and pillow cases on their bed. For the rest of the weekend, Kevin would sit at his housemate's desk and work on coding and writing assignments, stopping only for "bathroom breaks and food." When the housemate returns at the end of the weekend, Kevin would "just take off and leave their bed fresh

[remove the dirty sheets], and they put on the new sheets when they get back.”

Creating contracts for borrowing spaces continued with the non-profit organization that Kevin volunteered for throughout the week and sometimes on weekends. The non-profit offers programs and services for low-income LGBTQ youth. Kevin tutored youth in algebra, but the organization was interested in his experiences at Clearwater Academy, too. “So, they’re also kinda like the housemates,” explained Kevin. “They’re always and constantly asking me how I’m doing in class.” The non-profit also offered him a room to study. Typically, Kevin would spend two hours tutoring, but his working as a bouncer and as a grocer squeezed on his available time for coding. The non-profit works around his schedule, switching his two hours of tutoring with two hours of coding instead. Kevin notes, “With the amount of work that I’ve had recently, they’ve had someone fill my void. Fill the fact that I’m not there [to tutor].”

Utilizing this time and space relates back to Kevin learning from classmates and instructors. Classmates like DeAndre and Addie share common interests in music and anime, so Kevin bonds with them throughout the semester. Most importantly, however, they assist Kevin with difficult coding exercises from the interactive website. Alongside his classmates, Kevin explained, the technical instructor Richard played a significant role in helping him figure out if he should be a web designer and improving Kevin’s soft skills, like designing his resume and pitching ideas to investors. Thanks to them, “I’m definitely better at talking about myself in a professional sense. I’m not good at it, but I’m getting there . . . Coming to this class, with their assistance, and my classmates, too.” Thus, ways of learning coding in class wasn’t lost outside Clearwater. As explained before, the work of the code bootcamp followed Kevin to his home and to his non-profit where he gathered time and space to continue his productivity. Kevin’s stories about his network of support bring into sharper focus the role time and space may play in learning programming from a computer code bootcamp. Not only time and space in and of themselves but what happens within time and space. In this context, time and space are hot commodities that Kevin isn’t privileged enough to possess. Despite his limited sociomaterial conditions, Kevin pulls from a network of people and institutions additional time and space. The non-profit provides two hours of tutoring so Kevin can work on code; his housemates can use what time they had for their own responsibilities, but they are willing to switch chore duties with Kevin. Both the non-profit and housemates gave up their classrooms and bedrooms to Kevin. Most telling, however, is how adding these resources to his own schedule also allows Kevin to step away from life responsibilities briefly; he doesn’t have to attend to money or relationships, because others take on that work for him. This siphoning of time and space, and respite from other responsibilities, help him keep pace with coding literacy.

DeAndre: Body and Mind Preparation

DeAndre’s map (Figure 4) emphasizes the relationship between people and different external stimuli. The twenty-one-year-old drew an arrow from “Lots and lots of [weed]”⁴ to his friends while “Music” hovers nearby. Yet the other alters occupy a space of their own: two classmates at the bottom, “YouTube” on the right-hand side, and “Best Friend” near the top. This suggests that the other alters “free float,” that they independently offer resources but are not explicitly related to one another in

the same way as friends, weed, and music. These other alters appeared to supplement the heavy work that weed, friends, and music do for DeAndre as he learned coding literacy. This section unpacks how these three pieces shape DeAndre's behavior and thinking to help him prepare his body and mind for the demands of coding.

As he learned coding literacy, DeAndre said, he grappled with racist readings of his body based on the color of his skin and wardrobe. He wears hoodies, sweats, and sneakers, and long dreadlocks dangle from underneath a black baseball cap. Having dropped out of high school and feeling stuck in life, DeAndre decided to get his GED. The test proctor looked at DeAndre and assumed that he couldn't pass the required math exam. But DeAndre later surprised the proctor by answering nineteen of the twenty test questions correctly. DeAndre ran into similar issues when he interviewed for a spot in Clearwater Academy. Richard, the technical instructor, assumed that DeAndre wouldn't survive Clearwater's rigorous, fast-paced curriculum "based on [his] looks, everything."



Figure 4. DeAndre's "free floating" support.

Being misread occurred outside of school, too. In Chicago, DeAndre's default expression was "mean-mugging." This posture was a defense against anyone thinking of jumping him. However, living in the majority-white communities around Clearwater, DeAndre noticed that people seemed embarrassed by his facial expression, as if he were "crazy." This taught him that he "ain't got nothing to worry about up here." Feeling no sense of danger, unlike in Chicago, DeAndre chose to have a calm demeanor. DeAndre is aware of how race and place shape readings of his body and so adapts his behavior to match the expectations of that atmosphere. Weed seems to play a significant role in maintaining this calm demeanor so that misbehavior in class doesn't derail DeAndre learn coding

literacy.

To better understand DeAndre's testimony on how weed contributes to his learning and behavior, I want to place his experience in the context of current marijuana policy and research. Currently, there are disconnects among established scientific knowledge, lived experiences of marijuana users, and the policies and laws that disrupt literacy education and oppress racially marginalized people. Studies on cognitive performance and marijuana in general are inadequate because the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug. According to the DEA, marijuana has "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse" (DEA). This classification significantly limits researchers' access to marijuana to study its effects as they must seek DEA approval for all studies. So-called concerns about marijuana abuse have been used as a foil since the 1970s to enact racist methods of persecuting African American communities in disproportionate numbers compared to whites (Lynch 186; Alexander 59; Beckett and Herbert 68). Nevertheless, marijuana has been approved to treat certain conditions in 32 states (Lopez), and there's an abundance of anecdotal evidence (Green, Kavanagh, and Young 458) that suggest marijuana enhances creativity, although recent scientific studies that explore have found conflicting evidence (e.g. Schafer et al., Kowal et al., and LaFrance and Cuttler). Meanwhile, there is a long tradition of computer programmers using marijuana, and other drugs like LSD (Lysergic acid diethylamide), to address the strenuous work of coding at a computer or to arguably jumpstart creativity and rationality (Vekshin; Markoff 65–68). Given this context, DeAndre's story represents a common experience for millions of literacy learners; however, it also underscores the legal danger smoking weed poses to his own freedom and efforts to learn coding for mobility.

As weed is an important component in shaping his behavior and learning, DeAndre relies on himself and friends for a continuous supply. "If I don't have no weed, my roommate has some weed," observed DeAndre. "If he don't [have weed], Charles will have some. And he don't, Marcus will have some, and if he don't, I will have some . . ." But his friends also participate in helping DeAndre work through his emotions when he's upset. Familiar with his swinging moods, his friends would notice when something bothered him, even without DeAndre speaking about his problem. They would give him a blunt and sit and relax together in silence. Thus, friends and a supply of weed served as the foundation DeAndre's experience in Clearwater.

First, weed helps DeAndre find a calm and collected attitude in class. DeAndre noted that he doesn't use weed to "deal with stress," as stress is a life-long, daily experience that he can address with on his own; instead, he wants to just be "chill" at Clearwater. Otherwise, DeAndre admitted, he could get angry easily, especially when classmates didn't catch on to coding lessons as quickly as he expected. Thus, weed helps DeAndre keep a state of mind that allows him to maintain healthy relationships with his instructors and classmates, such as T-Dub and F-Dougie. These two classmates are key partners to his learning of coding literacy, especially later in the semester when Richard withdrew his helping. DeAndre recalled Richard saying, "We are at a point where I'm not going to help you no more . . . you smart enough to get stuff done on your own. Use your resources." Both T-Dub and F-Dougie were willing to give DeAndre clues on how to figure out coding problems or an issue in app development that he couldn't figure out. To DeAndre, T-Dub and F-Dougie are good

resources to tap into, and weed helps DeAndre reach out to those students without incident.

In addition to mediating his emotions and behavior, weed assists DeAndre in learning coding literacy itself. The drug “stimulates everything I wanted to do. I just do [tasks] faster. So if I wanted to focus on something I just smoke some weed . . . I can basically direct my effect to where I want it to go . . . to make it into a cerebral high.” DeAndre said that he even has agency over the chemical influences on his brain, that he can direct the high to keep him focused. Nevertheless, there’s a limitation to smoking weed. The high could be too much for him to handle in one sitting. One day while working on his resume, DeAndre was “high as hell.” Being too distracted from the high, he “went from one thing to another in less than 10 minutes because I kept thinking of new things. I kept switching [the resume], asking people what to do.” The distractions caused him to get nothing done in class, so he has to keep in check what goes into his body. Despite this danger, DeAndre sticks to weed because, if anything else, he likes not being too “turnt up” (being too excited) in class.

Music seems to share a similar cognitive and behavioral process that helps DeAndre manage his self-disclosed attention deficit disorder and stay in step with Clearwater Academy’s intense and fast-paced curriculum. DeAndre explained that he feels one side of the brain while working on something. When playing video games, for example, he feels activity happening in on the right-hand side, just above the temple. There’s still activity in the back of DeAndre’s brain but “it’s still distancing but that [the game] takes both parts of my brain. It’s still a lot of [mental] work.” When practicing coding, DeAndre finds himself needing to distract one thought while the other focuses on actual work. One part of the brain deals with the “numbers and letters,” he said, while the other part “has nothing [productive] to do.”

For example, to help teach computer programming, Richard, the technical skills instructor, directs students to an interactive website where they can complete lessons on HTML, CSS, and JavaScript and receive certification after completing a certain number of hours on the website. The website offers many options for how DeAndre might design the look and feel of his websites and mobile apps. But in addition to completing these exercises, DeAndre must turn in a web portfolio at the end of the semester. As DeAndre explained, “I keep thinking about certain things I got to do and certain shit I need to be coding. Like, ‘Oh I could be adding this and such and such. Or I add this and this [to the portfolio].’” The side of the brain that has nothing to do is, according to DeAndre, “the ADD side. That’s the side that says, ‘Yeah, let’s do all that shit at one time.’” DeAndre wanted to use the ideas he learned from the interactive website for the portfolio assignment, so he got sidetracked, tried multitasking, but got nothing accomplished. DeAndre was aware of this competition between himself and his ADD. Hence, music keeps the ADD side of his mind occupied while DeAndre codes. A variety of songs pass through his ears each day from beats that he “just found fucking dope” to A\$AP Rocky to Adele. With music playing in his ears, DeAndre “sings along and do the code camp. It distracts me. And it keeps my brain working on that while my right side is working on this. While my left side is focusing on quotes and lyrics. *Occupied*.”

DeAndre describes a mental model of how his ADD works. That awareness has helped him hash out an effective method to not get derailed from practicing coding. But this small task resonates throughout the network DeAndre established for himself. In other words, we can see how different

alters in DeAndre's network impact his relationships with other alters. His investment in objects like weed and music suggests that he staves off the consequences of bad habits: falling asleep in class, returning to a life of committing cons, and getting sidetracked not only from tabs on his browser but also his own thoughts. But this disciplining of the body and mind also helps with relationship-building. DeAndre might fall behind in his work and appear uninvolved in the class, so he learns to discipline himself based on the behaviors of his peers or advice from Janet and Richard. And weed and music keep DeAndre professional-minded and professional-acting in Clearwater Academy. But this strategy has troubling implications: while learning to mentally focus may not indicate a racial ideology, the behavior of his body implies that he must balance acting out his authentic racial identity with attitudes of discipline that can be associated with whiteness.

Responsibilities related to racial oppression make coding as a material and embodied practice more visible for study participants. Keisha living on the border of homelessness, Kevin in search for time and space, and DeAndre's racial body all implicate racial oppression as a risk to maintaining access. Programming looks like a cognitive process, but that dimension of learning may be a privilege for some who live in stable sociomaterial conditions. Participants call on and arrange additional alters to form their networks that help keep volatile conditions in check, within and without Clearwater Academy. Even this might be a privilege, as students from previous cohorts have been overwhelmed by physical and mental disability, childcare, and domestic violence, forcing them to quit Clearwater and quit coding.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Using ego network analysis, this study investigates the processes of how low-income African American adults access coding literacy as they manage the social and emotional consequences of white supremacy that may block that access. Clearwater Academy can provide ample resources for the cognitive process of learning coding literacy but doesn't have the same breadth of resources to circumvent the bodily, emotional, and financial responsibilities and challenges students must endure. For this reason, adults draw on an ad hoc cluster of support to design and patch up their vulnerable sociomaterial and financial circumstances. From these clusters, they gather resources that help them

“Combining these ways of seeing literate practice helps scholars understand how current racial formations (e.g. color-blind racism) intertwine with economic and political policy and influence literacy learning and the circulation of literacy materials.”

access coding literacy as a resistant response to inequality in their lives. Some resources from these networks of support include emotional agency, temporary time and space, and disciplining the mind and body. These resources may help create stability in the lives of participants across different contexts so that they can tap into an

uncommon and infrastructural literacy like programming. In describing these experiences, the study contributes to understanding racially marginalized communities' strategies for accessing new

emerging technologies. It shows how a complex network operates in helping adults approach these technologies when made available, demonstrating the kinds of knowledge they pose to make access possible in light of the racial inequality that may disrupt that access.

These findings encourage ample areas for further research. First, as literacy scholars continue to study writing ecologies and the materiality of literacy, they may draw on the critical race theory. Combining these ways of seeing literate practice helps scholars understand how current racial formations (e.g. color-blind racism) intertwine with economic and political policy and influence literacy learning and the circulation of literacy materials. Second, this study captures networks of support in a specific moment in participants' lives; there's opportunity for studying literacy practice and learning over a lifespan (Prior 217; Bazerman et al. 354-57). A long-view perspective of writing systems may help ecological writing theory take into account how writing ecologies change. By applying these theories to learning digital literacy, scholars may use ego network analysis to reveal other kinds of relationships between material and nonmaterial in a system of writing and what flows among those alters to support digital literacy learning. As composing and learning become more networked but vulnerable to historical and ongoing forms of identity-based oppression, writing studies can take up new tools to study these happenings and possibly influence the policies and attitudes that determine the social consequences of these digital literacy practices.⁵

NOTES

¹ HTML and CSS structure and visually style webpages while JavaScript automates tasks, such as algebraic calculations. Some software developers consider JavaScript a proper programming language over HTML/CSS. Coding literacy, I argue, does not make such distinctions; coding literacy encompasses the broad understanding and act of writing out a set of procedures, in any kind of programming language, for a computer to follow.

²All maps in this article have been de-identified and anonymized.

³Alters seem to share characteristics with literacy sponsors—“people or institutions that can help or hinder literacy for their own advantage” (Brandt 167). However, in ego network analysis, alters are the items named in the maps themselves. Another distinguishing feature of alters is that the scope of sponsorship widens to include locations of objects.

⁴Writing studies has yet to adequately theorize the effects of drugs on writing bodies. Although a necessary area of research, this topic does not enter the scope of this study.

⁵I thank the interview participants and course instructors for sharing their experiences. I thank Kate Vieira, Christa Olson, Morris Young, Matthew Berland, and John Diamond for their invaluable expertise and advice for developing this study. I thank the editors, two reviewers, and the copy editors.

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Shade: Literacy Narratives at Black Gay Pride

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KEYWORDS

Black queer literacies; throwing shade; queer; Black feminism; popular culture; signifying; snapping; embodied literacies; literacy narratives

“Shade is... ‘I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you because you know you’re ugly. Now, that’s shade.’”

–Dorian Corey, *Paris is Burning*

My experience with shade started before I understood shade specific to Black queer people.¹ Growing up in my family, the verbal was everything. If you were not quick-witted and could not use your words like weapons...actually I’m not sure what happens because everyone in my family had this ability, regardless of education level. As a young child, my aunts and uncles would say, “he’s got the ‘gift!’” This often came after someone asked me a question or made a request and then I snapped back with an attitude or witty remark. It was not until I got older that I saw my relatives “getting a dig in” by alluding to someone’s poor grades in school, “bad” hair texture, underachieving kids, or weight problem. While I long engaged in this practice with friends and family, I would later come to see shade as “shade”—as a critical literacy in the Black queer community. I use my experiences with family and friends and the video interviews with Black queer people to demonstrate shade as not just a slang term but representative of a larger literacy specific to these communities and heavily informed by context.

When I use the term literacy, I am riffing off of Eric Darnell Pritchard’s research along with other researchers who define literacy as a sociocultural communicative practice of meaning making that is not confined to words alone. As Pritchard explains in *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, there remains a need for

research on the long tradition of Black queer language, vernacular, and the rhetorical trope of “shade” and “reading” prevalent among Black queer folks, which would extend what we currently know about Black English and expand theories of “signifyin,” “masking,” and other features of African American language practice. (244)

Pritchard urges us to resist narrow definitions of literacy and to see the complicated, rhetorical, and embodied ways people make meaning. Shade represents one such literate practice. Informed by an oppositional consciousness, it is a multilayered way of communicating that is situated in the Black queer community. Despite significant work on literacy as a situated practice (Brandt; Street; Gee) in the African American community (Banks; Gates; Richardson; Smitherman; Young) and in the LGBT

community (Alexander; Rhodes and Alexander), only recently have scholars looked at literacy at the intersection of Black *and* LGBT people. Pritchard's discussion of "rereading" highlights the multilayered ways in which literacy operates, how its communicative potential is not always transparent to everyone at the scene ("This is Not" 280). In this article, the social space I focus on is the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride 2013, where I discussed shade and shade narratives with seven men and one transgender woman (see Figure 1). I chose Washington D.C. Black Pride in order to talk to out Black gay men and transwomen who were familiar with shade and saw themselves as a part of a larger Black queer community



Figure 1. The researcher, Seth Davis, *left*, and Patrick during 2013 interview. On the left and right sides are the other participants.²

I recruited participants who had knowledge about Black queer slang and who self-identified as members of this community.³ I approached Patrick first because we made eye contact and he did a double take, so I figured he would be open to being interviewed. After talking with Patrick, he recommended I interview some of his friends. I took on a snowball methodology, where my participants then recommended other friends of theirs to interview. I asked participants to tell me what they thought shade was. Rather than providing a definition, each of them told stories and gave examples of times where they either threw shade or felt it. Rather than representing these interviews only via alphabetic representation, I filmed all the interviews as, following Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe, I see video as way to capture *and* present this dynamic literacy in action. The videos are presented here as compilations that open each section. They are important to the claims of this essay in that they illustrate the embodied and performative dimensions of literacy and more specifically explicate its central themes.

I have come to understand shade in several ways specific to the Black queer community and as a practice of survival and self-defense. In the following sections, I turn to my analysis of interviews conducted at the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride festival, where my participants discussed and

told stories about shade. I invite the reader into an ongoing conversation in amongst “the girls” in the Black queer community. I present my analysis as video compilations and prose in three parts: *Narrating Shade*, *Shade on the Out-side*, and *Shade to Survive*. These themes emerged from the interviews and are in line with how I have heard shade discussed in popular culture and amongst my Black queer peers. I begin first by talking about shade as a fierce literacy.

Fierce Literacies and “The Girls”

I see shade as part of a larger fierce literacy or way of engaging in the world specific to Black queer people and women. For example, in this cultural moment, social media hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BlackBoyJoy, and #TransIsBeautiful are some of the ways Black and/or queer people are organizing, creating community, and talking back to dominant misreadings about who they are. These also inspire my understanding of “fierce literacies”—that is, a type of counter consciousness that allows Black queer people or “the girls” to riff off of static ideas of language and literacy both to communicate with and to create community amongst friends. Shade invites the listener to engage alternative or queer readings of the world in general and dubious statements in particular.

I use “the girls” as an organizing construct for several reasons. Black transwomen coined and defined shade. Colloquially, Black gay men often call each other “girl” and refer to gay men

“I see shade as part of a larger fierce literacy or way of engaging in the world specific to Black queer people and women. For example, in this cultural moment, social media hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BlackBoyJoy, and #TransIsBeautiful are some of the ways Black and/or queer people are organizing, creating community, and talking back to dominant misreadings about who they are.”

more generally as “the girls.” Also, it is a way to highlight the “girlfriend” relationships many of these people have with each other regardless of biological gender. E. Patrick Johnson argues that throwing shade is part of a larger “snapping” discursive culture specific to Black queer people and women and “girlfriend culture.” Fierce literacies continue a larger discussion of the ways Black women have used multiple forms of literacy, such as the essay, academic writing, discourse and Hip-Hop as a way to survive and gain agency (Royster;

Richardson; Pough; Houston and Davis; McEachern). For example, Montinique Denice McEachern discusses shade as a way to deal with microaggressions from a professor.

He would get to my name and tumble over the syllables, and each time I would be ready with a read like “I know pronunciation can be complicated, it helps if you sound it out.”

Similar to the impact of microaggressions, my reads would throw him off but leave him unable to specify what about the interaction made him uneasy. (83-84)

In this passage, McEachern talks back to what Pritchard calls “literacy normativity,” which aims

to keep make Black students feel self-conscious about their names and positions in the classroom. Instead, she made her professor feel uncomfortable for being ignorant.

After interviewing participants and observing shade discourse amongst my friends and in popular culture, I have come to understand shade in several ways specific to the Black queer community—and as a practice of survival and self-defense. I turn to my analysis of interviews conducted at the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride festival where my participants discuss and tell stories about shade. In this article, I invite the reader into an ongoing conversation in amongst “the girls” in the Black queer community.

Narrating Shade

“If you’re gonna throw shade, it’s important to know the boundaries between shade and disrespectful. It’s right there on the cusp.” —AJ



Figure 2. Video: Narrating Shade.

To access the video, click. <https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/x8SXk97D>. See appendix for transcript.

In this opening video, participants contemplate the meaning of shade: what is it, who throws it, and its meaning. I began by asking participants to define shade thinking that the focus would be a simple matter of definition. What I found, however, was that participants rarely gave a simple definition. Instead, the questions prompted narrative explanations that showed how shade was situated within a larger communicative practice, what we might call a situated literacy. Participants relied heavily on narrative as a method to remember, define, and illustrate shade. Often, they drew on scenes from popular culture, personal stories, and hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate a larger communal understanding of this practice. For most, this was not simply a matter of answering one researcher’s questions, but rather something they talked about amongst themselves. More specifically, their response shows how shade is used to bond friends and shun others. Their conversations also provide insight into how “the girls” understand themselves as individuals, in cliques, and as members of the Black queer community.

When Black queer people engage in *reading* and throwing shade, many are consciously connecting with Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which, for many, introduced the term and offered a look into these practices in action. For example, Patrick and Brant immediately reference *Paris* in their attempt to define the term. Patrick, in fact, suggests that one go to *Paris* for a definition. Although they do not explicitly reference the scene in *Paris*, they are no doubt thinking of Dorian Corey famously saying, "Shade is... 'I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you know you're ugly.' Now, that's shade." Here, Corey defines shade through demonstration, and this practice of defining by example was common among participants.

As the video begins, Patrick tells me that the definition of shade has changed over the years. In trying to provide a definition, he references *Paris*, a documentary now three decades old. Like those of a lot of Black queer people, myself included, Corey's explanation heavily informs his understanding of what throwing shade as well as reading shade are and how they are practiced. Following Corey's articulation of shade, Brant compares shade to haute couture and refers to shade as "haute teasing." His movement and gestures work to signify a grandiose posture which signifies a sense of elitism. Brant's explanation, like Corey's, is both descriptive and performative without offering a singular definition.

This turn to narrative is important in illustrating the multiple ways that shade is read and performed. James discusses shade as playful "sass" but also sees it functioning as a way to "cut someone down with words." Mervin echoes this sentiment, attributing shade to the Black gay community while also remarking on its duality: "When gay men get together...you're joking around with your friends...but then sometimes when people are jealous or would be considered haters, they may say things to pull out something negative about somebody." Mervin and James see shade as potentially light-hearted while also acknowledging that it can function negatively. Playfully insulting one's friends about their insecurities, for example, can be fun if you know them well. Mervin states, "They may talk about the way that they look or the clothes that they wear." However, it is easy to cross the line and offend someone. For example, AJ states, "If you're gonna throw shade at someone, it is important to know those boundaries between shade and disrespectful." Essentially, knowing, toeing, and exploiting the line between the two are the hallmarks of a good shade thrower.



Figure 3. Brant discusses the difference between reading and throwing shade.

Brant claims that “in order to throw shade, you have to know someone.” He goes on to liken shade to teasing rather than harassing, the latter intending to offend. I then asked him how he sees shade as different from reading. He explores the distinction between the two when he describes shade as an “elevated insult” and teases out the nuance between shade and reading. He uses Abbott and Costello and Shakespeare as reference points to discuss shade, with the latter emphasizing a grand yet subversive read. In this way, Brant’s response is informed by Corey’s saying, “Shade comes from reading. Reading came first.”

It is important to note that Brant was the only white participant in the study. To illustrate shade, he turns to iconic white artists and performers while at the same time, in other parts of our interview, he acknowledged shade as part of a Black queer tradition. Still, he helps us to see shade as a heightened and subversive form of reading. What I appreciate most about his interview is that in giving his explanation, whether he realizes it or not, he is demonstrating shade on an embodied level. If you watch Brant during his explanation with the sound off, or in the images above, you see him sitting as a queen taking on a posture similar to Corey’s as he casually yet flamboyantly riffs on shade. Note the grandiose way he frames the discussion by saying “shade to me” and how his hand flourishes, demonstrating a nonverbal performance that enhances his discussion of the differences between reading and shade.

Continuing the discussion about the duality of shade, AJ teases out the difference between shade and disrespect. In his example, calling a friend a walrus is outlandish and obviously playful, but asking what a stranger is wearing more direct. Patrick and Mervin also turn to personal narrative to describe situations in which shade is enacted, and in doing so, they illustrate how shade is a communicative practice that is part of their literate lives as Black queer people. After seeing Patrick talking to guys on Jackd, a gay hook-up app, one of his friends said he was giving “loose boots.” (“Loose” refers to what his friend sees as whore-ish behavior and “boots” is Black gay slang for very or extremely.) His friend’s ability to playfully tease him about being promiscuous and get away with it speaks to their relationship and the norms of their clique. Patrick’s telling of the narrative as humorous works to suggest this as well. Yet, as I have suggested, shade can also be cutthroat or something else entirely depending on the situation. It is the context as reproduced through these narratives, what I call literacy narratives about shade, that helps us understand the particular situation and thereby the intent. In this way, shade is always a rhetorical practice because of its attention to audience, time, and context.

Consider, for example, how Mervin uses shade as a defense mechanism in his story. Mervin tells me that he just ran into one of his ex-lovers at the Pride event and deliberately did not speak to him, which he provided as an example of shade. By pretending that he did not see his former lover, he was sending a message. The message could be that his life was now so full that he had no time to notice his former lover or it could be read as an intentional slight. In either case, it illustrates the ambiguous ways that shade is understood and performed. In reflecting on this moment, Mervin critiques his actions and suggests that they represent unresolved feelings about the relationship.

I also asked participants who throws the best shade, and the answers varied from specific people to cultural groups. Patrick pointed to older queens (Black gay men and transwomen) as the ones

who throw the best shade because of the wit that comes with maturity. “The older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade and... I’ve been read by an old queen just as a friend, and it be jokingly, but it’s actually really like *wow*, like I would’ve never thought of that.” Patrick professes amazement for his older friend’s shade acumen. In his comments, there is a reverence for older queens or the elders as experts as expressed in Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*. Similarly, *Paris* honors the knowledges and experiences of the older queens and housemothers. I have had similar experiences in my family and in the Black gay community, where the older queen had the most bone chilling shade in the room. Even in *Paris*, the house mothers and fathers are the ones teaching “the children.”

Donnell and Xion describe white gay men as being their favorite shade throwers. Specifically, Donnell teases out a difference between white gay men reading/throwing shade and Black gay men. While a white gay man may say that someone looks “a mess,” a Black gay man might say he looks “turned naked, back.” In the Black queer community, the word “back” is a term often used similar to “boots” to mean “very,” functioning as an exclamation point. Here, Donnell is essentially telling the person that he looks so bad that he should turn naked instead. He uses the example to demonstrate how white gays “give him his life” because they are often more direct and do not go for the extreme laugh.⁴

AJ answers my question by suggesting that he is the best shade thrower but then points to his friend Mervin. When recruiting participants at D.C. Black pride, I expected to interview only Black and Latino men and trans-women. However, after a couple of interviews, some of my participants, Patrick in particular, insisted I meet Brant “because he’s white and throws shade.” As I stated earlier, I am not arguing that Black women or queer people of color are the only people who throw shade; however, they are the ones who are most connected with the practice in the public imagination. Patrick began our interview saying that he did not know what shade was. It was only through his telling stories about himself and his peers that a definition emerged. He goes on to say that he sees shade as “calling them out in a smart way” and “saying it without saying it.” As I have demonstrated here, participants tended not to give an explicit definition.

Shade on the Out-Side

“I think that once you go outside the community, it changes the meaning of what (shade) means for us.” —Mervin

As suggested in the last section, shade is in vogue. It circulates within the Black queer community and also outside of it. While shade is typically considered an in-house practice amongst Black queer people who know each other well, many of my participants observed how shade was being appropriated in popular culture. When the word and the practice are taken out of the community and even commodified in popular culture, there are consequences: how we understand the practice,



Figure 4. Video: Shade on the Out-Side

To access the video, click. <https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/z9BEm2s4>. See appendix for transcript.

who we see as authorities on the subject, and our overall experience with it change. Most of the participants express ambivalence about the multiple ways that shade and Black queer life have been appropriated in mainstream white heterosexual culture. They cite examples from their personal lives, social media, and daytime and reality television to demonstrate how shade has been taken up outside of the Black queer community. What I hope to demonstrate here is how shade is culturally situated, how it cannot be understood in static terms, and how it has gone viral.

“When the word and the practice are taken out of the community and even commodified in popular culture, there are consequences: how we understand the practice, who we see as authorities on the subject, and our overall experience with it change. Most of the participants express ambivalence about the multiple ways that shade and Black queer life have been appropriated in mainstream white heterosexual culture.”

In recent years, shade has found its way into the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, which defines it as “US slang”: “to express contempt or disrespect for someone publicly, typically by subtle or indirect insults or criticisms.” But as I have shown, it is a practice that goes back decades, and its appropriation is not new either. The most famous example is Madonna’s 1990 hit song and video “Vogue,” based on the dance form of shade birthed out of the Black queer community. More recently, it has become popular on

reality television such as *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Shade is also taken up across social media; my participants, and specifically AJ, Donnell, and Xion, discuss how digital

spaces are often ripe place to throw shade without having to deal with the consequences.

Patrick talks about seeing the Black gay lifestyle merge with mainstream society and mentions Beyoncé's and Jennifer Lopez's music videos that feature the nonverbal/dance form of shade: voguing. Patrick goes on to mention the singer and reality television star Tamar Braxton's use of Black queer slang such as "Girl, get your life" and shade as examples. Similar to Brant, Patrick does not just reference Braxton's appropriation of gay lingo, but he also performs it. He takes on an over-the-top tone and manner to illustrate how it is done. He then expresses ambivalence about how shade is being appropriated in popular culture: "It's good because it is getting us out there and it's sad cuz it's kind of our identity that's being kind of taken." His comments about "us" and "our identity," and his overall concern with the effects of this appropriation suggest what some might call a Black queer nationalism, the desire to name and hold on to specific practices, texts, and spaces for the survival of Black queer people. Even though I see shade as wed to Black women's speech acts and literacies, I can relate to Patrick's ambivalence over Black gay language being used in spaces where "the girls" are often not welcomed.

Other participants pointed to examples of Black queer culture being appropriated in television and music. In order to discuss shade in mainstream culture, Brant tells a quick narrative about how shade is one of many Black queer cultural texts that has been appropriated by white people. He mentions *Paris* and voguing as two of several Black queer cultural texts that existed first amongst Black queer people before finding their way into Black communities at large and being appropriated by the larger white mainstream culture. He jokes "Then Madonna took it and made it "Things for White people." We both laugh at the absurdity of his statement said in jest, especially as it runs against the history that he just sketched. Still, Madonna's influence in the mainstreaming of the dance drawing on Black and/or gay culture cannot be overlooked.

AJ mentions *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Married to Medicine*, and *Bad Girls Club*, which all have majority Black female leads, as reality television shows that have incorporated shade and other Black gay lingo into cast discussions, programing, and advertisements. In a reality television context, shade or throwing shade is the perfect phrase to denote the subversive insults and statements that are at play as people are put into situations with people they do not like, where they have to constantly discuss each other's personal business. In this way, shade thrives on reality television, and many of these shows' proximity to Black gay meccas such as Atlanta, New York, and Washington D.C. can also explain how the term shade has so much traction in these heterosexual spaces. The widespread circulation of the term has made it trendy for many people outside of the Black gay community. For example, AJ states, "I think it's something that's become really popular in the culture now. I even have some straight male friends say *Oh, that's the shade.*" In this way, straight people are appropriating the term to describe a phenomenon. They evoke and play with the ethos of a Black queer person. Shade becomes a discursive olive branch of sorts to engage with a Black gay person(a) and Black gay culture more largely.

Donnell and Zion mention TMZ, Joan Rivers, and Wendy Williams as mainstream media entities who use Black queer language. Donnell states, "Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny." We go on to talk about the fact that Joan Rivers, who would famously joke about her

own appearance and plastic surgeries, was funny and good at throwing shade because she could make fun of and throw shade at herself. Xion goes on to mention Wendy Williams and how she plays with people's accusations that she is a transgender woman by joking during her show that she has to get out of her drag after filming. "I thought that was hilarious. It's the shade within itself," Xion says. Even on an aesthetic level, drag makeup and culture have been appropriated by mainstream makeup and media entities. *RuPaul's Drag Race* features challenges in every episode that educate the viewer and the queens themselves about the Black gay roots of gay culture and white mainstream culture.

Several of the participants are uneasy with Black gay culture in the mainstream. For example, at the beginning of this section, I quote Mervin's statement that he feels that the meaning of shade and other Black and/or queer cultural texts change when they are co-opted by white culture. At first, when I ask if shade should be used outside of the Black queer community, he states that no one should throw shade, taking into account the negative forms of the practice. When I clarify that I am talking about white appropriation of shade, he explains, "Once you go outside the community, you're changing the definition of what it means for us, and I find that that is an issue with a lot of the things we do." The "we" he refers to I assume is Black gay people, but he could easily be talking about the ways Black, Latin, gay and other minority cultures are routinely appropriated. He goes on to say, "Pretty soon there will be a whole different definition to the term shade." Language and literacy more generally are not static and evolve over time. However, Mervin is speaking specifically about the ways white heterosexual culture often oppresses Black and Brown queer people and their cultures, while simultaneously aping and commodifying our cultural productions for higher profit.

Brant discusses shade's appropriation by straight people by telling a narrative about two of his female friends (one Black and one white) on Facebook asking what shade was. He forwarded them an article that defines the term. He goes on to tie shade to a larger history of drag in the Black community. I hesitate as I ask Brant if he feels shade is a "Black thing." I hesitated because I did not want him to feel uncomfortable about being asked about something that is marked as Black. I did not want him to think I was challenging his authenticity or right to use to the term. In retrospect, his attendance at Black Gay Pride showed how he was comfortable with Black gay culture even if he had not reflected on his position as a white gay man in this community.

Brant states that he would not say that shade is still just a Black thing and says, "There are cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another." So, in a sense, it is understandable that there is some overlap and that white and/or straight people often use ethnic cultural terms or engage texts that are trendy without knowing about them. He playfully teases, "No one can be educated on the history of shade unless they're writing a doctoral thesis on that." For the record, I caught that shade, and it is a dissertation and an article, not a thesis. I laughed, though. Brant discusses shade's origins in the Black gay community and explains how the larger gay (read white) community has taken up Black gay culture. He states that white people do not use shade unless they are quoting or evoking Blackness. When he says this, his body language and arms gesture towards the embodied and performative nature of shade, as in when white people use shade as a term, they are often referencing shade in a Black context or from a Black person even if they do not say it. This exists in a larger conversation about cultural appropriation, specifically where white

people often have more freedom to evoke ethnic personas than do ethnic people.

Lastly, I ask participants if they see a lot of shade on social media and digital spaces. Most report that they see a lot of shade in outlets such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. James and I discuss Twitter as a shade breeding ground because the character limit forces people to cram their read into 140 characters. However, he goes on to say that he does not look for shade in social media. In response to the question, Xion yells, “Yeah! They read for filth!” as she and Donnell discuss the various shady memes and conversations that they have observed on social media. Xion discusses how people manipulate arrows in the comments section to bring attention to a specific person in order to throw shade. Then, Donnell discusses the use of “#iDied” as phrase to signify that an image or statement was so funny and/or ridiculous that it literally killed the viewer on sight.

Both of these are examples of how Black queer people actively manipulate language and digital spaces using very few characters. Donnell goes on to use an example of a meme of a girl with short hair squeezed into a ponytail with the phrase “Bitches be like, ‘My hair growing.’” Mervin then teases the meme out. The punchline of the joke is that many Black people share the cultural knowledge or memory of a girl who was trying to grow or give the Eurocentric illusion of long hair but clearly had short hair. Mervin goes on to laugh at the scenario. “You look at ‘em like ‘You know damn well your shit ain’t growing. You lying like shit.’” AJ, who works with queer youth, discusses the ramifications of shade and cyberbullying. “It’s really sad cuz I work with the youth and a lot of times they won’t throw shade to their face, but they’ll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone.” These typically in-house conversations now take place with a global audience of more than Black queer people, thanks to the Internet and social media. This definitely impacts how the shade is received and makes it more extreme. It is the difference between literally the whole hallway laughing at you and what feels like the whole world laughing at you via social media.

Shade to Survive

“Not everyone can throw shade at me. I wouldn’t allow it.” —Patrick



Figure 5. Video: Shade to Survive

To access the video, click. <https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/Ji36PeZt>. See appendix for transcript.

In earlier sections, we saw the different ways shade has been evoked—from playful shade to shade as “the ultimate,” as Donnell and Xion refer to it. Participants often moved beyond the notion of shade as just verbal sparring, seeing it rather as a rite of passage among friendship groups, a sign that you can take the heat and are part of the community. Still, for some, shade is a byproduct of insecurity within the community, often suggested by larger racist, classist, transphobic, effeminophobic and sizeist ideals promoted by the dominant culture. In this way, shade is a tool for survival, simultaneously working to mock the oppressive forces at work.

In the “Ugly Side of Shade Culture,” Jamal Lewis writes about shade as a protective armor used to combat oppression. “Its armor,” he writes, “protected me from bullying and the harsh realities of gender-based violence and body shaming throughout middle school, high school, and my early years of college.” He continues by saying that he does not see shade as positive, noting that he cannot recall shade “ever being a fun thing to do.” He writes, “I later freed myself from this armor because it began to feel toxic—it wasn’t healthy, even in instances when I used it to defend myself.” Former NFL player Wade Davis and managing editor of *The Feminist Wire* Darnell Moore (Moore and Davis) discuss shade in a similar way in their *Huffington Post* conversation “Tongues Untied: Shade Culture—Throwing Shade, Reflecting Light.” Davis does not see shade as mean-spirited but rather as a way for guarded individuals to protect themselves:

I realized that many of our young people use shade to engage each other because many of them have been kept at a distance by people in their own lives. I found most of their shade

performative, meaning they were just doing it to gain favor or the attention of another, and it had very little to do with intentionally wanting to hurt the person being shaded.

I am divided when it comes to shade. I love *talking shit*. Rather than relying on typical scripts—“Good Morning” “So how’s that dissertation coming?”—I and the participants in the study see throwing shade as an art form and as a way of building connections. My friends and I have fun riffing, signifying, and playing with language. Still, I can think of many instances in my life where shade has gone wrong, and I have also used shade as a crutch instead of talking to people directly about the things that were bothering me. I titled this section “Shade to Survive” to highlight the way that the participants and I have used shade simultaneously to get a laugh, build friendships, and as a form of protection. Darnell Moore asks:

But what are we trying to protect ourselves from except the possibility of connection and love? Maybe shade is the result of our fear that if we are too nice or too open or too vulnerable (God forbid), others will hurt us.

While I appreciate Moore’s sentiment, I also recognize the brutal realities that many Black LGBTQ people face on a daily basis.

At the start of the video in this section, Patrick speaks to some of the messiness of shade, how it does not fit neatly into a negative or positive box. When I asked him if throwing shade is always a negative thing, he put his shades on like it was a music video and answered “No.” To be honest, I thought the question was a bit redundant because we were just talking about shade in the context of his friendship group. His response, however, illustrated the complexity of shade. He said, “It’s a way to confirm your friendships” showing it as both strengthening community and as a survival tactic. His response speaks to the intimate cliques to which many of my participants and many gay men belong. Nothing is off limits among participants who rely on their wit and candor to throw shade among their friends.

This makes a clear in-group and out-group when it comes to shade because one’s friends can typically broach delicate subject easier than someone on the outside. Patrick speaks to this differentiation by stating that not just anyone—that is, people who aren’t his friends—can throw shade at him because he “wouldn’t allow it,” meaning everyone knows not to try it with him because he would “clap back” against it. Here, Patrick suggests he can check or discipline anybody who shades him outside of his clique. His attitude speaks to the larger fierce or grand persona that informs the practice of throwing shade. However, he enjoys shade when his friends throw it because he recognizes “the art of shade is wit” and that everybody cannot do it. Following Lewis, Davis, and Moore, these comments remind me of how nebulous the intent of shade can be and how the practice can often be informed by real hurt and insecurities, which causes rifts in relationships.

An interesting finding of my interviews was that the participants often read themselves or their situations. For example, Xion describes her plight as a D.C. performer. Looking at the stage where she is scheduled to perform, she and Donnell laugh with the realization that few people will be there and that Xion will likely be coming home with little in tips.

Xion: I can come out and say, “Oh, I just feel like doing this event. As a performer, I’m gonna make \$50.”

Donnell: Okay!

Xion: In the back of my head (long pause). Shade is, look at the crowd, look at the population I'm serving, look at where the stage is. I don't see it happening.

Shade is evident to those who understand the impossibility of Xion making \$50, considering the location of the stage and the sparse audience. Donnell cosigns and responds by affirming, "You gon' make your fifty dollars" because it is clear given the circumstances that she is not. Similar to the performers in *Paris*, Xion and Donnell, like many Black queer people, often signify and play off of situations by throwing shade.

In this example, Xion and Donnell evoke a "laugh to keep from crying" rhetoric to cope and have fun with even disheartening situations. They go on to discuss shade being informed by context and intent. In order to explain shade, many of my participants attempted to remember instances where they threw shade or shade was thrown at them. However, Donnell provides examples of shade in action when he throws shade at Xion. He calls Xion "Erykah Badu" because she is wearing a gele similar to the singer's. By saying this, he is playfully teasing her for looking like Badu, which could be an insult to some people especially in a culture where Blackness and Afrocentrism are regularly critiqued.

Xion makes it clear that she is not one of those people and appears to take it as a compliment by quickly responding, "I live for Erykah." Another read of Donnell's shade is "I see you think you look like Erykah Badu, but you don't." Donnell goes on to compliment Xion on her style, suggesting that the shade he was throwing was for fun and not designed to hurt her feelings. He explains that they



Figure 6. Donnell enacts Xion throwing shade.

are friends and that if someone else threw shade at him, he would cut them up. He goes on to say, "When she gets up in them, she's cunt." In this statement, Donnell clears up any misunderstandings about his true feelings about Xion by suggesting that when she gets dressed up, she is ultra femme.

Xion and Donnell also talk about the performative aspect of shade when they discuss how one detects it. Specifically, Xion states that "It's not what you're saying but how you convey it" and that it's the force you put behind your words and the setting that signifies the perceived intent of the message.

Donnell, as illustrated in the montage above, also points to the nonverbal dimension of shade using Xion as an example. He states that he can tell when Xion detects and throws shade just by how her body moves: "Now when she throws shade, she doesn't just do it with her face she goes...." Then Donnell (in character as Xion) begins contorting and making noises as if his body is shifting in order to throw shade. He continues, "and I be like 'Xion! Stop!'" Xion nods and confirms, "My whole body

reacts.”

Because Brant’s friends are Black, he is part of the friendship network of the participants in this study. When I tell Brant his friends say that he is the best shade thrower, he blushes and is obviously flattered by Patrick’s notion of him being the best shade thrower in his clique. However, he goes on to say that he is someone who deflects a lot but does not mean harm when throwing shade.

When I throw shade, I may present myself...as being regal, distancing myself a little from it, a little bit, because I don’t wanna look like I’m trying to hurt someone’s feelings. So when I making fun of you...I do it in this overt very grandiose way. So it looks like I’m presenting a joke instead of like I’m hurting someone’s feelings.

I can relate to Brant’s hesitation and sensibility to throwing shade and receiving shade because throwing shade often creates a hostile situation between people who do not know each other or at least do not know each other “like that.” He offers a Facebook example that walks the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate shade. Weight and size can be sensitive issues in the queer community. Brant’s and the other person’s candor suggest a congenial relationship but they do not confirm it. While Brant states that the exchange was lighthearted, the move to present oneself as being unbothered or immune to the shade is common in the Black gay community. Brant states that his friend’s response was meant in jest, but his demeanor suggested that it might have hit deeper. Brant’s desire for his friend to enjoy getting the bigger laugh is at the heart of throwing shade. However, throwing shade is like Russian roulette in the sense that it is hard to gauge how far is too far and what insult will deal a destructive blow or get your ass whipped.

Concluding Thoughts

Since 2013, when I first started working on this project, mainstream audience interest in the lives of Black queer people has increased. June 2019 was the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, a rebellion against police brutality in Greenwich Village that sparked the gay liberation movement. The documentary *Paris Is Burning* is gaining new audiences everyday via Netflix and YouTube. Reality television shows such as Vice’s *My House*, FX’s *Pose*, and MTV’s *Are You the One* have recently focused on Black queer people and their points of view. In particular, reality television is where the term shade thrives as a way to point out that which cannot be seen or repeated. Even before I started working on this project, shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* introduced genderqueer friends Dwight Eubanks, Miss Lawrence, and Derek J. Many episodes highlighted Black queer lingo and how it travels from the gay scene to straight spaces. Specifically, the close relationships between the Black female cast members and their best “Judys” demonstrate how Black women and Black queer people experience life in similar ways and share a common literacy.

One of the contributions of this research is that I was able to investigate how shade functions in a particular friendship group. Patrick and the other participants’ shade narratives speak to how shade functions as rites of passage into his peer group and the larger Black queer community. The participants discuss shade’s origins and its practice as a litmus test or entrance exam other queer people must pass to enter their clique. Many of the participants shared pop culture examples, shade

stories, and anecdotes in order to tease out throwing shade as an on-the-spot literacy—that is, a language practice that is impromptu and in response to a particular situation. Additional research is needed to explore the literate practices amongst Black queer friendship groups in order to more deeply catch literacy in action over a longer period of time as it is born out of “the girls” lived experiences.

All of the questions that I asked participants were practiced on my friends and family before I went to Washington D.C. Black Pride. I mention this because fragments of my life and links to pop culture have allowed me to understand and explicate shade. I identify as a Black gay man and member of the Black queer community. I believe that it is necessary to know this in order to understand my relationship with the participants, the communities in which we participate, and the texts examined. I live in and navigate the spaces where my research takes place. I see myself as one of “the girls,” and this research as linked to my own rite of passage.

I am reminded of the words of painter Kehinde Wiley, who in a PBS documentary discusses the film *Paris Is Burning* and the 1980s ballroom scene as inspirations for his work. Specifically, Wiley talks about voguing as one of the few tools at the disposal of disenfranchised Black queer people to make fun of and speak back to white mainstream society: “They were also I think in a way making fun of *Vogue* magazine, making fun of the powerful. It’s always been the clown who could make fun of the king, in front of the king and that type of clowning and aping is something that exists in that work as well.” Wiley’s discussion of voguing, the dance form of shade, reengages what I find most interesting about shade, which is that it is both a product of Black queer folks’ relationship to white supremacy and homophobia and a tool for me and many other Black queers to navigate potentially hostile places.

As I have argued throughout this article, shade is not merely a slang term. It is a part of a larger fierce literacy of practices Black queer people use to survive and navigate the world. This article has illustrated how shade and literacy are more generally understood via conversation and has offered

“Even though Black people in many ways have been stripped of our African languages and cultures, I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival that has existed within the Black queer community, connecting us back to a larger Black oral tradition.”

some insight into shade as a Black queer cultural happening and practice. In order to truly understand shade as an embodied literacy of survival and a rite of passage, we must engage with the history of racial and sexual oppression and violence against Black queer people in the United States since 1619, when the first Dutch colonizers brought the first enslaved Africans to America. In *Paris*, a voiceover discusses the ways

Black people have been stripped of their culture and forced to assimilate to white ideals of language, beauty, dress, professionalism, and decorum in order to survive a larger white supremacist society:

And when it come to the minorities, especially Black, we as a people, for the past 400 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had

everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive. However, what must be understood is that Black people have not simply assimilated to whiteness. We, as Black people, have figured out ways to maintain, mix, and mesh who we are in order to survive in hostile spaces. Even though Black people in many ways have been stripped of our African languages and cultures, I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival that has existed within the Black queer community, connecting us back to a larger Black oral tradition.

NOTES

¹I use the terms queer and gay interchangeably throughout this article. Most of the participants who appear in this study did not identify as queer. I use queer as an umbrella term to include transwomen and gay men because I believe it is necessary to queer understandings of the Black oral tradition that include Black queer lives.

²Center photograph by Marshall A. Lattimore.

³This study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University.

⁴Note that we're two Black men at a Black gay pride event talking about a Black cultural phenomenon and still, Donnell ranks white gay men above Black gay men.

APPENDIX I

Throwing Shade in the Park Transcripts

Narrating Shade

- Patrick: No, I say OK, well I can tell you that over the years the definition has changed. Cause if you watch movies like *Paris Is Burning* they have like kind of definition of it. I can't tell you exactly what it is.
- Brant: Shade is... It's sort of like an elevated way of... to me. It's like a heightened sense, like, *haute* (like *haute couture*) It's like *haute* teasing.
- James: I mean its sass. I think it can be playful when you're trying to like rag on your friends or/and sometimes in the Black gay community it's kind of a way to someone down. Cutting them down with words.
- Mervin: What I think shade is is... usually when gay men get together. It depends. There are two different variations. One can be like joking around, kind of cracking jokes, being lil shady, throwing shade at your friends, but it can be in a humorous way but then sometimes I think when people are jealous or what we consider haters they may say things to try to pull out something negative about somebody. So maybe talk about the way they look, the clothes that they're wearing, something negative that can just make them look bad.
- AJ: I think shade is a form of expression that is within the Black gay community of kind of making fun of each other or joking with each other in a playful way. I think it is important to know if you are going to throw shade, you need to know what those boundaries are of shade and disrespectful. I think it's right there on the cusp and I think it's a form of communication that is really popular in our community.

- Brant: But I feel like for people to do shade well, you have to know someone and so I always want to say that it is more akin to teasing then harassing or like being belligerent towards someone.
- Seth: OK. So, like what would you say the difference between shade and reading is?
- Brant: I feel like with reading its sort of... It's more... I would say that it's like slapstick and sort of like you're going for like the quick joke. With reading, like you just want to pull out, pull it out really quick...
- Seth: More direct?
- Brant: Right. But with shade it can be more. It can be longer. I feel like with reading it's like Abbott and Costello and with shade its sort of like Shakespeare. The idea is the same. It's entertaining. You're gonna laugh. But It's like the context, shade gives it more depth.
- Donnell: When you throw shade, just like she said it's how. It's the setting. the place, the time, what you're doing at the moment. It's like all of that crap. If I threw shade at her now, as you know, this my sister so I wouldn't throw shade at her to like to belittle her and disrespect her. I just play with her and she throws shade back. It then turns into what she called a Kiki and then we'd be like, oh bitch, you tried it and you know, it makes you like check yourself. You know what I'm saying? If she said I look a mess or something, just throwing shade. I'd be like, "hold on, wait a minute, you're playing games." And It's out of fun, but if we was to see a random walk by we'd be like, "Look at this mother fucker. Her wig is laid like Whitney Houston's third cousin. Like have you seen that on YouTube? You know what I'm talking about?"
- Seth: Where is that from?

- Donnell: Just like turning it. Huh?
- Seth: Where is that from?
- Donnell: It's on YouTube. If you look at "Whitney Houston's third cousin," like the shit is funny.
- Xion: I think overall, it's just like not only when you see something you just can't take but... What am I trying to say? Especially... a lot of times also in this community especially being a Trans Woman, when you see something or you know something about a person that you know it's very sensitive to them or it's like a part of their self-esteem or anything and you purposely throw that out there to damage them, that's just like shade overhaul.
- Donnell: That's the ultimate shade. If you will... We call that the ultimate shade.
- Brant: I feel like shade can be really, really damaging. You can see things that like really hurt a person's feelings. If you take from the small attributes of a person and make them big, I think that's part of what shade is a sort of like taking little itty-bitty clues about who a person is and how their personality is, and how they look and making a big grand grandiose statement about them.
- AJ: There is the shade you can throw with your friends. "Girl you look real big like no legs, lookin a walrus or something. Something with your friends... and then there's the shade from people you don't get along with. They look in the street like, "What is he wearing?"
- Mervin: For example, I'll tell you an example here at this event we're at. This Black Pride event. There are a few guys here that... There's one guy in particular I went on a date with, whose here, the date didn't go so well but I just don't feel the need to speak to him. And I see him and he sees me. So, in a way I was throwing

shade because I've just decided not to speak to him when I walked past him. It's like really when its gets to the bottom like, why am I doing that? It's kind of a little immature, but at the time it goes back to again insecurities. The date didn't go the way I wanted it to do. So, I feel like I need to do what I can to make him feel a certain way.

Seth: ...to feel like you felt about the date.

Mervin: Exactly. I think that's what people do. They throw shade to make people feel the way that they feel. Even if they didn't do anything to them, initially, if they feel bad about not having designer clothing or having a great job, they'll find a way to make you feel bad by throwing shade.

Seth: Who would you say throws the best shade?

AJ: Who throws the best shade? Well me, of course.

Patrick: I want to say like... the older queens actually have the actual art of shade like its evolved over the years and I think that the older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade. It's just I've been read by an old queen as a friend and it be jokingly, and it's actually really like wow. Like I wouldn't have never thought about that.

Seth: Tell you me what groups throw the best shade do you guys think Black men, Black gay men, throw the best shade or Black women?

Donnell: Black gay men are funny but those White men...

Xion: The White corporate queens give me my life.

Donnell: They funny. They feel as though like, "Bitch, you can't touch me" and like don't get me wrong they cool. Like everybody is cool. Shade is funny regardless. But to Black people, it's like their shade is more raunchy. They just out there to get you but with White people

it's like "Bitch, you look a mess. "Like you think about it and you're like who would say that.

Xion:

Exactly.

Donnell:

Black people be like, "Girl, she look turned naked." "Like, he look ugly back." Like shit like they, they add extra little words to make it funny.

AJ:

I don't know. Personally, my best friend Mervin, who is over there, throws a lot of shade. He's really well at doing it.

Patrick:

But it's basically just calling somebody out about their flaws in a way that... I can't describe it... like in a way that you like for instance, to give you an example, my co-worker like we work together and I was on Jack'd and he was like...

Seth:

What's Jack'd?

Patrick:

Jack'd was like a social media website, or social media application on your phone. Basically, like to meet other guys or talk to other guys whatever. And so, I was on Jack'd and he was like just giving like (I was) giving like... loose boots, which means basically that I was just for the most part, just being just loose with myself like talking to guys I don't even know about. you. Telling them all about me and I just think that it's an art of basically telling people about themselves and just kind of calling them out in a cute smart way and I think...

Seth:

So was him calling you loose boots... was that shade?

Patrick:

Yeah, that was shady.

Seth:

Now why was that shady?

Patrick:

Because my thing is if you don't have something nice to say, don't say it all, but he could have easily been like, "Oh, you a hoe or you're being whorish" but he

said it... Using shade is like giving “loose boots” It’s like a jargon.

Seth: Its saying it without saying.

Patrick: Essentially.

Shade on the Out-side

Patrick: Like in today’s society, like our lifestyle, like the black gay lifestyle is being merged with mainstream society. So, when you see dances, like, you know, Jennifer Lopez just had a video come out. Look it up. And there’s voguing in it. And Beyoncé has those techniques in her videos. And I mean, I just think that shade is included in that merge. “How is it being used? I mean just look at the way Tamar Braxton talks.

Seth: How does she talk?

Patrick: I’m just like, “Girl, get your life!” It’s just like it’s a merger. I can’t explain it. It’s good because it’s getting us out there. But it’s kind of sad because it’s our own kind of identity that’s being kind of taken.

Seth: Do you see shade being used like on television or like in the larger society?

Brant: I do think that. I think that um... I mean... obviously it’s like with shade and reading. Those things were sort of popularized by Paris is burning in the early nineties, with like voguing and when, when, so that stuff was sort of presented to larger society or even just LGBT people because obviously like voguing and the ball scene came from the African American community and then it developed into being embraced by the gay community. Then Madonna took it and made into like, “Things for White people.”

- AJ: I've realized that even in pop media, especially the reality TV shows, they've taken the black and gay language and they've incorporated into the Real Housewives, Married to Medicine, Bad Girls Club, and all these reality TV shows where they use the word shade a lot. They say like, "Oh, that's a shade!" or "Why you throwing shade at me?" I saw in the reunion of the Housewives of Atlanta. I think it's just something that's really becoming really popular and it's in the culture right now. I even have some straight male friends say, "Oh, that's the shade." So, I think it's starting to evolve into its own, you know.
- Donnell: TMZ
- Xion: All of the housewives.
- Donnell: TMZ
- Xion: Wendy Williams is cute shade.
- Donnell: What's that Bitch? Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny. You can't tell Joan Rivers nothing. You look at her and you're like, "Look at your face!" Peeled. Like your face is pulled back for three gods.
- Seth: ...but she shades herself about it.
- Xion: Yeah, exactly.
- Donnell: She shades herself about it, but she like, "I don't give a fuck. I did it. I know I did it but it ain't nothing that you can tell me that I cannot tell myself but Imma go in on your ass. Who else I like? Willie Williams! shady.
- Xion: She shades herself too and I've realized it recently. I know in a lot of the media people or people in general just like the whole "She's a trans sexual" allegations like the other day on her show she was like "I can't wait to get back stage, to quit, and get out of this

drag.” I thought that was hilarious. Like that’s shade within itself.

Donnell: That’s funny. And everybody always say Wendy Williams is a drag queen.

Xion: (indiscernible)

Donnell: Getting rid of the Adam’s apple and all, bitch. Just peeling.

Seth: Do you feel like shade should be used outside of the black gay community or what?

Mervin: I think it is but it is also not. What do you mean “Do I think it should be used?” I don’t think it should be used at all to be honest.

Seth: Interesting point. From what I was thinking of... is like seeing like maybe a straight white guy talking about throwing shade.

Mervin: I don’t know because I think that once you go outside of our community it starts changing what it means for us. I find a lot of times, that’s a big issue with a lot of things that we do. Its starts one way but over time when it gets into mainstream, it starts to look a lot different and people start to interact with it a lot differently. So, I do feel like if the white community or other communities get a hold of shade (heterosexual community the white community), they definitely change the idea of what we see shade as. Ya know and pretty soon it will be a completely different definition to the term shade.

Brant: It’s hard because it’s sort of like things like RuPaul’s Drag Race have made using the vocabulary very trendy. I think it gets muddled a bit now but I think you see it. I see one of my friends I’m from North Carolina. I went to college in Greensboro, North Carolina, and she posted a thing the other day that was like “What is shade?” This straight woman had

had an experience with shade obviously. I don't know what it was, but she heard the word and he didn't know what it was. And she was embarrassed to ask and she said that on Facebook in her Facebook status. And another straight African American woman was like, "Yeah, I don't know. Can someone explain this to me? And so, I found this article online that was like, "Straight people, this is what shade is..." So, I shared it with them. Um, and so I think that it's something that people are getting to be aware of even though it's obviously been around much much longer. So, it's because we have outlets like things like RuPaul's drag race that help popularize like drag. There's other parts of drag and I think that I think drag in the African American community have a very specific relationship. They kind of like mold together to integrate into the larger society.

Seth:

Okay now, I'm going to have to go for the obvious question: Do you consider shade to be a black thing or what's that?

Brant:

I wouldn't say that now. I wouldn't say like, oh well like, "black people throw shade," but I feel like I feel like they're cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another. I think, and this is obviously based on very little... you can't be very educated on the history of shade unless you were writing your doctoral thesis on it. And so, it's my understanding that that sort of something that came from like a subculture of African American LGBT people and then it was popularized by all gay people. So, I don't think, I would say "Shade is for Black people" now. But I would argue that it was. And maybe... I don't know White people that say like shade without them somewhat evoking something that's very, like, that's separate from them. Does that make sense? They'll say like, "Oh, she's throwing shade" but it's clear they're quoting like, I don't want to use this example so much but RuPaul's Drag Race or trying to quote other things that people say without knowing

the context of it.

Seth: Do you ever see shade on social media?

James: I mean recently I guess it's more like twitter. I don't understand. I mean it's just like by saying your little things like "This person is no one" or you'll be hating. People are doing it on twitter. That's what I see more of. I'm not technically on Facebook cause twitter I mean it's where you can say the least amount of things possible. So, it's like just something quick.

Seth: So it's kind of a breeding ground for shade since you have to be abbreviated in first place. Okay. What about Instagram? Are you on Instagram?

James: I am on Instagram. But I'm not, I mean I on it. I just when I get a picture, I do it. I mean I don't personally see a lot of people doing it but I don't look for it either.

Donnell: Yeah, the they read.

Xion: All the time they read for filth.

Donnell: Definitely when they tell people that their hair is laid like Nene Leakes.

Xion: Or sometimes I'll see sometimes on Instagram or Facebook. If somebody says for example, I comment on your status and one of your friends so-call themselves throwing shade at me because (indiscernible), they make little asteroids going up and do an LOL or do something about the person up without mentioning them. To me, I think that's so much shade but it's funny.

Donnell: Now when people say, "I died" like "I nearly died", I laugh so hard. I'm sorry, God. Throwing shade is like "bitches be like my hair growing". They got the small little ponytail, ya know.

Xion: All those Instagram pictures are shady.

- Donnell: I be like, “That’s some shady shit.” That’s funny. You think about it and you think about a bitch in your neighborhood, or like a girl in your neighborhood, or somebody in your neighborhood say they hair growing and you look at them like, “You know damn well your shit ain’t growing. You lying like shit. No, you had to perm it to get that small ponytail.” Like, that’s throwing shade. I just threw shade.
- AJ: It’s really bad because I work with the youth and a lot of times they won’t throw shade to their face but they’ll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone... or posting text message conversations stuff like that to hurt somebody. I think that’s when we cross the boundary from shade to disrespect. I think it’s a very fine line and people like to take advantage of crossing that line. Because when they take it too far and someone calls them out on it, they can say “Aww... I was joking. I was just throwing shade” and they don’t get held accountable for what they say.
- Seth: Do you see it on twitter?
- AJ: Definitely. Twitter, Facebook, all types (indiscernible).
- Seth: Okay, Well I definitely appreciate your help. Great Interview.

Shade to Survive

- Seth: Is shade always a negative thing?
- Patrick: No, I think it’s just like for instance if you have a good friend and you’re talking to them and you’re being shady towards each other it’s just kind of like, it’s really just a way to, I guess, confirm your friendships, if that makes sense. Not everybody could throw shade at me. I wouldn’t allow it. Some people say it and I kind of clap back. I have an issue with it. If it’s somebody close to me or someone I trust, or a friend and they’re being shady, it’s cute. I actually enjoy it. Because the art of shade is wit.

- Seth: So, everyone can't throw shade, then?
- Patrick: No, not everyone can throw it. Some people are a little too dense in the head to do something like that.
- Donnell: And in D.C., we call it slicing. Slicing is nothing but to hype it up.
- Xion: I think sometimes... I know myself I tend to throw shade or kiki to just make situations better. Like I could come out and say, "Oh, I just feel like doing this event as a performer, I'm gonna make fifty dollars.
- Donnell: Ok.
- Xion: In the back of my head, shade is: look at the crowd, look at the population I'm serving. Look where the stage is. I don't see it happening but sometimes as friends we kiki and ha-ha to pacify the situation almost like making jokes out of it so that nobody feel crazy... (indiscernible)
- Donnell: Bitch, you know damn well you ain't finna make fifty dollars with these little bit ass people but you gon make that fifty dollars. Like ya know just slicing it. "You gon make that fifty." See that hand. "You gon make that fifty dollars." You know how like slicin it.
- Seth: That was the... that's the shade right there.
- Donnell: That's the shade
- Seth: Okay.
- James: I have a lot of straight friends and heterosexual friends that...I think it's more like special to gay culture in a straight world they don't know what shade is. Like it's an insult. Like I guess if you say something that's kind of tongue and cheek or just rude. So, I think that in the gay world to make it playful or make it a little but special I guess that's why it's called shade.
- AJ: To me shade is very interesting because I think that there is a level of playful joking around with shade, but when I'm really looking at shade, I'm looking at the root of where it came from and a lot of times I feel like it's... you're doing that compensate for your own things that you might be self-conscious about or things that you're uncomfortable with

yourself. You will deflect that and throw shade at somebody else. So, you're not looking at yourself, if that makes any sense. And then you play it off by making it into a joke. Even though sometimes there's some truth behind it.

Mervin: I think there are a lot of insecurities in our community. I think it stems from all we have to deal with outside of our community. And then within our community there are a lot of guys who are under a lot of pressure to look a certain way, dress a certain way. They have to wear certain labels. They have to hang out with certain people. And if they don't do these things often times or if they can't do these things, sometimes times they can become shady to other people who can or who are considered attractive and what we consider to be attractive.

Donnell: If I was to look at Xion and be like, "Bitch, look at Erykah Badu." Because she got the wrap on her head. You know what I'm saying? That's throwing shade. But at the same time...

Xion: Which is a kiki for me because I live for Erykah

Donnell: Basically, she lived for Erykah, but at the same time I'm looking at Xion like "That's my bitch." I like the wrap. It fits you. But you know if you say something funny out the mouth to me bitch, Imma cut your ass up. I don't know if we can curse or not but...

Seth: Oh no, no, definitely, definitely.

Donnell: ...but it is what it is. That's the way I am

Seth: It's part of it. It's part of it.

Seth: Now why do you think people throw shade?

James: I think people have different motivations, I guess. I mean I think like I said, it's like if it's a friend, like sometimes you can rag on your friends if they're not wearing like... if they're looking a little rough or whatever. Then, I mean Sometimes there's just like a way of playing with them. I don't know, I mean other ways? Like I mean I guess that's the thing if it's your friend, playing around, but then that could easily turn into something else if your intention is different.

Seth: Now who throws the best shade? Like what type of person? What

groups?

James: Well people here in D.C. throw a lot of shade. I just move out from California. Yeah, it wasn't too much shade being thrown over there. So...

Seth: Why do you think that is?

James: So, I think it's just laid back. California's very laid, very relaxing and people I mean it's just I guess they have other things to do then do that. But here I notice especially a lot of the gay black guys. They, they can throw. They can throw it. Definitely.

Seth: How does it make you feel? Ok, because it's very interesting because you're white, but your black friends pointed you out as like a master shade thrower. Like what do you make of that?

Brant: (chuckles) I don't know... but wouldn't say (chuckles) It kind of embarrassing. Um, I don't know. It's harder for me because I don't think that sometimes I'm like, "Oh, it's my intention to throw shade now." But again, as someone who deflects a lot, who teases other people because I have, I have, I am sensitive. So, people tease me all the time about lots of things. So, I have to learn to tease other people and I, I think that because I don't. It's very interesting. So, I tease people without really meaning to hurt anyone's feelings. I don't like to hurt anyone's feelings. So, when I throw shade I think, I think I might present myself in that way like what I said, being regal and sort of distancing myself from it a little bit because I don't want to look like I'm trying to hurt someone's feelings. So, when I make fun of you, I do it in this very overt grandiose way. So, it looks like I'm presenting as a joke instead of like trying to hurt someone's feelings. Does that make sense?

Seth: Yes. Okay, then that makes me ask do you ever throw shade in combat then, in verbal combat?

Brant: Um, not really. I'm not very combative. So, it's hard. Like if someone gives me... like if someone makes fun of me, I will. I will. So, an example. Someone on Facebook. I keep using Facebook. I hate being digital generation. They were like, "Oh, I'm finally back at the gym. #Shredded" And so I commented, "Shredded, as in you shredded up your gym membership end now you're finally getting to go back" and everyone was like said that was shade, but I was like, "Oh no, I'm just

making fun of the words that you used.” And so, then he replied with, “Yeah darling, I’ll see you at Dunkin donuts tomorrow morning” because I go to Dunkin donuts every single day. And so, like he got me and that’s hilarious. So, I won’t really combat with someone if they get a good one on me because I want them to be like... if you get me, you could have that. Because I am going for the laugh. If a lot of people will laugh at something, if it’s at my expense, I will bow down and be like “Yes, go ahead.” Because that’s what... I want everyone to have a good time.

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Book Review *Literacy Work in the Reign of Human Capital* by
Evan Watkins

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Decades after Harvey Graff's research complicated the correlation between literacy acquisition and social and economic mobility, literacy myths are alive and well in twenty-first century cultural discourse. Graff himself, in his 2010 article "*The Literacy Myth at 30*," remarks on this persistence, saying, "I am . . . struck by the resilience . . . of 'literacy myths' around us Literacy myths continue to sprout like weeds" (636). In *Literacy Work in the Reign of Human Capital*, Evan Watkins provides an updated version of the literacy myth for the digital age, one that encompasses widely accepted perceptions of the relationship among education, digital literacy, and economic success. The myth, he says, is that educational reforms centered around digital literacy training will help to narrow the growing economic divide between classes in the United States. In other words, if students are trained to use technology well (and not just for entertainment purposes), they will have a leg up in the current economy. Watkins counters this perception, saying,

I'm hardly opposed to the mythic hope for educational reform and the idea that educational institutions might allow more students than ever to experience an entire spectrum of multiple literacies far more than ever before. But none of that is likely to happen without changing the occupational structure of the economy and completely reconfiguring the reign of market forces assumed to determine economic value. (29)

For Watkins, educational reform with a focus on new literacies will not solve economic disparity—instead, the structure of the economy itself would have to change.

Watkins's work aligns with other literacy studies scholarship concerned with the role and value of literacy skills in our modern economy. He positions himself in conversation with Graff and Deborah Brandt, citing extensively from Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* to make the case for literacy skill as a resource which is highly valued, labor-intensive, and rationed by economic forces. Unfortunately, the timing of publication meant that Watkins missed the opportunity to respond to Brandt's 2015 book, *The Rise of Writing*, which traces writing's cultural and economic history in America, underscoring its long-standing association with work and the transactional sphere. According to Brandt, the rise of mass writing parallels the emergence of what has been called the knowledge (or information) economy, wherein "texts serve as a chief means of production and a chief output" (3). While Brandt's research focuses on the workaday writing practices of workers in a knowledge economy, Watkins is interested in theorizing the everyday (and not necessarily work-related) literacy practices of consumers in an economy that highly values *human capital*, defined as any "resource that is embodied in the person of its possessor. Hence in corporate terms, the education,

skills, intelligence, and even character of employees can appear as capital assets” (4). For Watkins, the concept of human capital is meant to capture the embodied labor involved in so many everyday literacy skills, from the myriad literacies required in the contemporary workplace to the most mundane practices, such as using an ATM to withdraw money from the bank. Watkins uses the ATM example early in his introduction to argue that the economic value of these everyday literacy skills flows toward the institution—that the consumer’s embodied labor benefits the banks (who can, for example, hire fewer employees because ATM literacy is so ubiquitous and customers can perform tasks themselves). This unidirectional flow of benefits “extends a class division of winners on the inside and losers everywhere else” (9).

To support this claim of increasing economic stratification alongside the emergence of new literacies, Watkins structures the four chapters of his book as extensive literature reviews, synthesizing scholarship from a vast range of disciplines to situate literacy alongside issues of economy, labor, technology, and human capital. He draws on the work of literacy scholars, of course, but also economists and information technologists, film theorists and sociologists. In chapter one, he traces the concept of *human capital* from Adam Smith’s eighteenth-century text *The Wealth of Nations* through contemporary economic theory, critiquing the modern tendency to downplay labor and ignore the potential for antidemocratic stratification that accompanies this downplaying. After tracing theories of human capital from other scholars, in chapter two Watkins proposes his own concept of *just-in-time human capital* as a way of theorizing human capital in our current economic moment. He explains,

The radical departure that distinguishes what I call just-in-time human capital...is the elimination of any perceived necessity for depending on large and available reserves. Like the just-in-time corporate organization that takes its name from the minimization of inventory—no more than what is necessary on any given occasion—just-in-time human capital minimizes reserves as much as possible . . . Workers can become redundant in much the same way as excess material inventory (15-16, 17).

This *just-in-time* approach may increase economic efficiency and productivity but, as Watkins notes, those benefits do not necessarily flow back to the individuals whose embodied labor was called upon in the moment of need (65). In chapter three, Watkins traces variations of the argument that we do not, in fact, exist in an information economy but rather in an *attention economy*. Information is ubiquitous and readily available in the digital age, and its value is entirely dependent on the attention that is paid to it (attention being an arguably more finite resource). Watkins ultimately argues for attention-as-human-capital; in other words, consumers constantly perform the (unpaid and unrewarded) labor of attentiveness, and the capital benefits of this attention work flow outward rather than inward. Chapter four ties together the threads from previous chapters to support Watkins’s central argument: that “inequalities [are] a symptom of the class division produced by the concentration of human capital” (23) and that current structures of labor, education, and attention-as-human-capital have created “a world in which being rich in literacies does not necessarily translate at all into human capital wealth or position” (25). Watkins supports this argument by laying out and then dismantling

his version of the new literacy myth. Ultimately, he writes, “The key question is not how to initiate necessary [educational] reforms against the dead weight of past practices and institutional inertia. The question is how to radically alter the direction of those reforms already transforming education into the profoundly antidemocratic narrative of human capital triumph” (160). In other words, the structures and ideologies of our human capital-driven attention economy need to be reformed rather than merely our educational approaches to teaching digital literacies.

While it is not entirely clear, after reading Watkins’s book, exactly *how* economic and ideological structures would need to and could shift to help resolve the vast (and growing) class disparity in the current US economy—and while his concluding outlook on the “antidemocratic narrative of human capital triumph” (160) feels quite bleak—Watkins’s extensive and interdisciplinary synthesis of scholarship related to literacy and human capital provides a useful starting point for researchers interested in pursuing these questions further.

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Book Review *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia* by Candace Epps-Robertson

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Resisting *Brown: Race, Literacy, & Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia* exemplifies the benefits of local history. As her subtitle suggests, Candace Epps-Robertson examines the complicated nexus of race, literacy, and citizenship in America, focusing on a school district in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision. *Brown v. Board*, one of the most consequential Supreme Court decisions in American education, overturned decades of legally-sanctioned “separate but equal” schooling and compelled racial integration in public schools. More than 60 years later, it is easy to look back at *Brown* and see it as a victory for civil rights and racial equality. To a degree, it was. But as Epps-Robertson demonstrates, in many places the response to *Brown* was anything but celebratory. In 1954, for instance, Prince Edward County’s all-white board of supervisors did nothing to integrate the county’s schools. The same was true in many Southern public school districts. When the federal government implemented additional measures in 1959 to compel reluctant schools to integrate, many relented, but Prince Edward County’s board of supervisors got destructively creative. Rather than integrate, the board of supervisors withdrew funding and shut the public schools down. Prince Edward’s public schools remained closed until 1964—a full decade after *Brown v. Board*—when the US Supreme Court ordered them re-opened.

Prince Edward County’s educational history is fascinating in its own right, but as Epps-Robertson argues persuasively, white citizens’ opposition to integration in Prince Edward County demonstrates a fundamental—and hardly settled—struggle over literacy, citizenship, and race that vastly exceeds one locale in rural Virginia. Epps-Robertson contends that literacy and citizenship have a very complicated relationship in America, and perhaps most especially in the Black community. In her introduction, she details some of the ways in which literacy has been used over the course of American history to both subjugate marginalized communities (often, but not exclusively, in the form of denying people access to literacy) and to uplift them (often, but not exclusively, in the form of providing access to education). Neither literacy nor citizenship is a universal remedy to systemic oppression, and in fact, both are complicated by their relationship to one another.

In chapter 1, Epps-Robertson provides historical, racial, and educational contexts to frame her study. She shows how significant the Black population was in Prince Edward County beginning in the mid-1750s. Despite their presence, however, Black citizens had few formal education options. Even when options were available, they were substandard. In other words, Black education and white education in Prince Edward County were always separate but never equal. It is within this context that Epps-Robertson situates the Prince Edward board of supervisors’ reaction to *Brown* in 1954. In short, white resistance to integration (segregationists dubbed it “Massive Resistance”) extended

two centuries of white Prince Edwardians' efforts to prevent Black access to education, literacy, and citizenship.

Chapter 2 is organized into two significant sections. In the first half of the chapter, Epps-Robertson draws on extensive archival research to detail segregationists' rhetorical efforts to prevent integration. She argues that segregationists, including prominent senators and congressmen, drew on rhetorics of states' rights, freedom and liberty, and southern identity to defend segregation as necessary to their "way of life." Epps-Robertson focuses particularly on Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr., whose arguments for segregation equated segregated schooling with good citizenship. Representative of responses to *Brown* throughout the South, Byrd's advocacy for the "Virginia Way" drew on beliefs about tradition, culture, and social norms to suggest that integration would fundamentally undermine what it meant to be a citizen of Virginia. It was in this rhetorical context that the decision to close Prince Edward's public schools was made. This historical context frames the second half of chapter 2, in which Epps-Robertson delineates responses to the school closures by members of Prince Edward's Black community. As she explains, "[s]ome Black families moved outright, while others would wake in the early predawn hours to transport their children across county lines to localities with functioning schools" (44). Some Black citizens opened their homes to children in the community, and others homeschooled. Black churches provided space and support for civil rights organizing, and the NAACP pursued legal avenues for overturning the school closures. Citizens and civil rights groups also organized protests, sit-ins, and petition drives.

In chapter 3, Epps-Robertson turns her attention to one of the most significant efforts to fight "Massive Resistance," which was the establishment of the Prince Edward County Free School in 1963. Backed by the federal government, the Free School was an integrated public school that served more than 1500 students—mostly Black, but some white—in the one year it was opened. Epps-Robertson argues that the Free School both met the need for public education and responded directly to white supremacist rhetorics of resistance. She contends in particular that the Free School's pedagogical practices and literacy education were designed to cultivate Black students' citizenship practices. Although administrators and teachers disagreed over how best to provide literacy education to meet the goals of supporting informed citizenship, the Free School ultimately balanced teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogies to support students' diverse educational goals as best they could under the circumstances. Epps-Robertson carefully situates the pedagogical and administrative practices—and their benefits and challenges—of the Free School in relation to rhetoric and composition scholars' historical knowledge, and in so doing, demonstrates how local history can complicate our beliefs about the vital connection between literacy education and citizenship.

In chapter 4, to drive the point home, Epps-Robertson interviews former Free School students to gauge their reactions to their time there. Interviewees expressed widely varying sentiments about their experiences at the Free School, including differences of opinion about the quality of educational offerings, the effectiveness of the endeavor in general, and the Free School's usefulness in challenging "Massive Resistance." The interviewees' experiences are both intimately connected and widely divergent, which is why it's such a useful and important chapter for illustrating Epps-Robertson's argument about the complex, and sometimes contradictory, relationship of race, literacy,

and citizenship represented by the Free School.

In her final chapter, Epps-Robertson draws lessons from the Prince Edward Free School experiment to inform contemporary discussions about race, literacy, citizenship, and education. Noting, for example, connections between “Massive Resistance” and contemporary discussions of privatization, vouchers, and school funding, Epps-Robertson invites readers to think carefully about how education, literacy, and citizenship are connected to social and racial justice, freedom, and critical engagement, as well as to systematic oppression, racism, and injustice. For Epps-Robertson, the Free School “provide[s] us with a most intriguing set of possibilities to reflect upon if we are to continue to invest in literacy as a means for developing a just and equitable society” (121).

Resisting Brown concludes with the unsettling—if not terribly surprising—observation that the challenges Free School teachers faced are still very much with us in American education. And as with the Free School example, Epps-Robertson makes the compelling case that literacy and citizenship are not silver bullets for solving the problems of white supremacy, unequal educational access, and racial suppression. Still, Epps-Robertson ultimately calls for reinvesting in literacy education specifically designed to support citizenship as a way to strengthen students and their communities. It is not a new call, but readers would be well served by picking up Epps-Robertson’s book to see why her particular call is one worth heeding.

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