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LiCS MISSION STATEMENT

Literacy in Composition Studies (LiCS) is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors activity at the nexus of literacy and composition studies. We publish long-form scholarly articles and short-form pieces including book reviews, interviews, symposium essays, and work in new and emerging genres.

Given its ideological nature, *literacy* is a particularly fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and to social and cultural groups. Literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. Literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. At its heart, literacy is situated within sociocultural contexts and is connected to power and inequality.

The term *composition studies* points to the range of writing courses at the college level, including FYC, WAC/WID, writing studies, and professional writing, even as it signals the institutional, disciplinary, and historically problematic nature of the field.

We invite authors to consider how multiple groups of people seize power and agency through literacy practices and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on and/or constitutes the writer, even as the writer seeks to act on or with others. By exploring the intersections of literacy and composition, we further seek submissions that draw from the broadest range of traditions possible to promote equity and justice within our disciplines, classrooms, and communities. We particularly invite work that:

- examines the literacy practices, processes, and histories of marginalized and underrepresented communities.
- adds new or challenges existing knowledge to literacy's history.
- analyzes the processes and power relations whereby literacies are valued or circulated.
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, linguistic, historical, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities.
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities.
- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities.
- 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.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE 13.1

We have to change everything (Gilmore and Kaba).

We begin the introduction to this special issue by paraphrasing abolitionist organizer and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore.

Change is at the heart of abolition—not small, meaningless, incremental change, but radical change. Abolition is—and has for centuries existed as—a set of liberatory practices developed by Black and Indigenous communities that not only seek to combat colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy, but also strive to construct life-affirming systems in their place—where everyone can have what they need to survive and thrive (Ervin; Hayes and Kaba; Maynard and Simpson).

As has been documented time and time again, the interlocking crises that humanity faces are immense, to say the least: countless police abductions and killings, rising wealth inequality, the erosion of labor rights and worker protections, continued genocide in Palestine and Sudan, planetary degradation, ongoing colonial rule and extraction, global hyperincarceration, rampant surveillance, and unchecked tides of fascism and white nationalism. The harm perpetuated by such violence is, of course, disproportionately visited upon Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, trans, immigrant, and/or disabled people.

In the face of these death-making systems, we believe that abolition is the only way forward.

As urgent as calls are to abolish ICE, abolition necessarily precedes this current iteration of American fascism—just as it precedes 2020's global uprisings for racial justice. As stated by Critical Resistance, a US-based abolitionist organization created near the turn of the twenty-first century, abolition entails "building an international movement to abolish the prison-industrial complex" (Critical Resistance). We can trace this work even further back to nineteenth-century efforts that put an end to chattel slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Hartman). We can also find abolition involved in anti-carceral movements after the Attica Prison uprisings, during the United States's "war on drugs," and during the post-9/11 Islamophobic surveillance state. Abolition's historical legacy in scholarship and activism proves it is not new, despite its uptick in interest during the 2020 uprisings. As we argued in the call for papers for this issue of *LiCS*, "[T]he time for literacy and writing scholars to critically address abolition in all its forms is long past (formerly: now)" (Cavallaro, Green, Middleton, and Navarro). Therefore, "What should we do?" responses to this call are not only reminiscent of the performative "anti-racism" of 2020 (and thereafter) but also ignore the ongoing work of prison abolitionists since the 1970s.

All of these dynamics are incredibly relevant to literacy studies. The material conditions of our social and political worlds shape the dispositions and actions of undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, researchers, staff, and community members alike. Many of us in and around the field are employed by the imperial university (Chatterjee and Maira), whose neoliberal operations harm minoritized and multiply minoritized workers (Kannan, Kuebrich, and Rodríguez), gentrify and raze surrounding communities (Baldwin), and suppress student activism and protest (Rallin). The majority of our professional organizations, academic journals, and many leading scholars have chosen to remain silent while witnessing Gaza's destruction and the ongoing massacre of Palestinians. Abolition means centering solutions that come from those who bear the brunt of oppression and colonization. For example, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI)

was created in 2004 (Palestinian BDS National Committee), and, in the midst of the most publicly visible genocide in world history, continues to be ignored by many of our governing institutions, including flagship organizations in our disciplines like the Rhetoric Society of America and the (now de-chartered) Conference on College Composition and Communication. We believe the job of potential allies is to self-educate, to educate within their communities, and to listen to and amplify Palestinians and Palestinian organizations. Though many would like to think otherwise, the fields of rhetoric, composition, and literacy are animated by this same machinery of oppression endemic to the global university. Given these fields' ongoing obsession with generative AI—itself a tool of racism, fascism, theft, anti-cognition, violence, and planetary degradation—there does not seem much by way of critical (scholarly) mass that would lead us toward liberatory visions for literacy and writing.

It's all the more reason that we hope the pieces in this special issue provide glimpses into what these abolitionist futures—and present-day contexts—can look like. Whether through explorations of on-the-ground tenant organizing, border checkpoints, or death row counterstorying, among other topics, the writing featured here shines a light on how literacy is entangled in struggle, freedom, and imagining life otherwise (Sharpe).

Both Anne Wolf's "Queer Black Imagination & Abolitionist Futures: A Community-Based Approach to Narrative Change" and Joesph Patri Brown and Alison Turner's "Magnifying Dissent: 'Illuminating' the Capital Appeals Process through Abolitionist Literacy Narrative" employ narratives and storytelling to amplify the experiences of individuals who are formerly incarcerated or on death row. Wolf analyzes their experience facilitating a workshop to engage Black community members through theory, community-building, conversation, and worldmaking with hopes to inspire radical imagination for abolitionist futures. Brown and Turner explain Brown's appeal process and the literacies necessary to navigate a carceral system. With the need for people impacted by the carceral state to have their stories humanized, you may appreciate how both articles' storytelling exemplifies abolitionist literacy practices.

Brynn Fitzsimmons's "We Keep Us Safe: Abolitionist Literacies in the Work of Lu Lu Livingston, At Your Service" and Nick Sanders's "Mapping the Emergent Abolitionist Literacies of White Racial Un/learning" help us consider how abolitionist literacies are a reflexive process as we continually deconstruct carceral logics. Fitzsimmons makes evident the literacy skills used in abolitionist housing justice organizing like self-determination, interdependent safety, and liberatory care. These abolitionist literacies are further explored by Fitzsimmons through the organizing work of a housing justice organizer named Lu Lu Livingston, At Your Service. Sanders reckons with how white people can, through emergent strategies, un/learn the white worldviews, policies, and practices that contribute to the carceral state. Sanders's white un/learning is an abolitionist literacy practice useful in disrupting the white supremacist imaginations that foreclose abolitionist futures. Through these practices, both contributors suggest models for you to gain insight into the recursive literacy work necessary for abolition.

The final two pieces in this issue are Larry Morgan's "Border Checkpoint as Literacy Technology" and Filimon Fregoso's book review of *Abolitionist Intimacies: Queer and Trans Migrants Against the Deportation State*, both of which invite us to think about the role of borders and deportation within the carceral state. Morgan's argument for seeing borders as spatial literacy technologies that—as carceral tools sustained by hegemony—continue to harm communities is timely as we witness ICE inflicting violence in cities that are hundreds of miles from the physical US–Mexico

border. Fregoso's review continues this thread. In his review of *Abolitionist Intimacies*, he showcases how queer migrants move toward abolitionist practices and offers his own reflection on the continued violence of deportation infrastructure and how it impacts academic life. Both pieces offer you a chance to understand how borders and deportation are tools of the prison-industrial complex and how abolition is crucial for transformation.

It is our hope that you will engage holistically and reflexively with these pieces, and that you will bring them into your classes, into your communities, and into your scholarship. New ways of doing things are needed. It is quite possible that our work will look radically different in the next ten years. And yet, our work must center our students and the communities we belong to and live among. Each of these pieces is a reminder for us to do this work, despite the distraction and noise of the crumbling empire we find ourselves in.

—Alexandra Cavallaro, Erin Green, Logan Middleton, and Marco F. Navarro

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Queer Black Imagination & Abolitionist Futures: A Community-Based Approach to Narrative Change

Anne Wolf — Unaffiliated

KEYWORDS

Abolition; Literacy; Narrative; Black Abolition; Abolitionist Futures

ABSTRACT

Prison abolition isn't solely or even primarily about abolishing prisons; rather, it's about building alternatives and abolishing the conditions that make the very notion of a prison and its incumbent carceral logics possible. I posit that one such condition is the inadequate compensation available for Black people to do imagination work, thought work, and literacies work. Black people, while dramatically and disproportionately impacted by the carceral logics of racial capitalism, are denied access to opportunities to freely imagine alternatives and create strategies to enact them. Drawing on queer Black feminist studies, literacy studies, and abolitionist theory, I argue that those with institutional resources and power can support spaces where formerly incarcerated people can engage in compensated literacy work that troubles the complexity of living between the oppression and possibility under two categories deemed "not-fully-human": Blackness and "criminal." These spaces, when designed to honor embodied and community-based forms of meaning-making, create opportunities for those impacted by the criminal legal system to resist carceral logics through practices of embodied literacy.

In my work, I am often asked by formerly incarcerated people, with a raised eyebrow, "well, have you been to prison?" There is a demand in this question that I account for my experience and acknowledge my inability to know the embodied experiences of those who are directly impacted. I have never been incarcerated, and my commitment to abolition requires me to take this demand seriously while using the creative and positional power that I have to resist carceral logics and dominant narratives about worthiness, criminality, and punishment. This is tricky when my colleagues who are formerly incarcerated employ these dominant narratives in our work together. Who am I to tell someone just returning from prison that they are using a narrative that harms people, or to assert that the way they are telling their stories upholds a problematic logic? On what basis am I standing when I say that we all, regardless of our proximity to and experience with the carceral state, ought to be telling stories that resist oppressive logics because abolition requires us to do so? This article articulates the conditions that make an abolitionist literacies posture possible and necessary, while critically analyzing the complexity that occurs in the dance between dominant narratives and counternarratives within literacy practices as they edge and resist carceral logics.

Dominant narratives about incarceration are built on carceral logics—logics that uphold crime as an individual act and see punishment as a tool of safety. Borrowing a concept from Eric Darnell Pritchard, carceral logics act as a kind of "literacy normativity" that weaponizes literacy against racialized, non-heteronormative-conforming people. Abolitionist literacy practices might move us towards Pritchard's idea of restorative literacies, which "restore not only the individual but also [restore] positive associations to literacy itself through the belief . . . in the power of literacy for social and political change that emerges from and evidences love as a radical praxis of freedom and care for self and community" (*Fashioning*, 39). To find a path toward abolitionist literacies, we need to understand how literacy normativity functions in the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

In the context of reentry and incarceration, literacy normativity shows up in specific ways. In a study of narratives of men who were recently released from prison, Lucius Couloute and Dijonée A. Talley find that narratives related to hyper-individualism and meritocracy are often encouraged and rewarded in the process of reentry. They explain that "the field of reentry instills a sense of personal responsibility, demands accountability, and preaches self-improvement, but cannot provide tangible pathways to success that can contend with the structural barriers faced by those returning home" (Couloute and Talley 20). They call this narrative phenomenon "criminalized individualism," which they define as "an agentic—albeit constrained—strategic response to the cumulative disadvantages experienced by those convicted of crimes" (20). Noteworthy here is both the importance of the agency with which criminalized individualism is deployed, alongside the problem that its use, and the use of other modes of literacy normativity, pose for abolitionist literacy practices.

As a Black queer person, I experience racialized heteronormativity and am subject to attendant assumptions about my humanity, worthiness, and potential criminality. However, having never been incarcerated, I am still able to shine a spotlight on the broader implications of collaborative work done by people who have and have not experienced incarceration. Those of us who haven't been incarcerated operate in a

position of potential ambiguity in relation to abolition work. We seek to work with and not for, to leverage our power and resources while prioritizing and amplifying the power and resources of folks who have direct experience of incarceration, and to find spaces of solidarity that feel meaningful to us and useful to people with direct lived experience of incarceration. We have to find ways to ethically contribute to abolitionist futures, while foregrounding the words, ideas, and decision-making of people with direct lived experience of incarceration. People who are most directly harmed by systems of oppression should be central in analyzing and redesigning those systems. In some instances, this is easier said than done. Practical concerns make it difficult for formerly incarcerated community members to find the time to write, theorize, and share their ideas. Moreover, the criminal legal system is designed to teach people that they are unworthy and incompetent, and to force them to differentiate themselves from their "criminal" past, which may include family members and friends, as a price of freedom. The goal of the very notion of criminality is to separate criminalized individuals from the category of humanity, and to inflict economic and social punishment upon them in an ongoing way, both inside and outside of prison. How can both those of us with direct lived experience and those of us without direct lived experience of incarceration intervene in these conditions to make abolition more possible? For the remainder of this paper, when I use 'we' and 'our' in this text, unless otherwise noted, I am referring to collaborative work of abolitionists, whether formerly incarcerated or not.

I argue that, since carceral literacy normativity links survival to reductive narratives and limits our ability to operate within a narrative frame of abolitionist resistance, queer Black radical imagination and embodiment can serve as a restorative literacy practice and move us towards abolitionist futures. Justice-impacted storytellers and activists can do literacy work in a space between coercion—employing carceral literacy normativity—and agency/resistance—pushing for linguistic justice (Baker-Bell). There is potential for abolitionist power in the paradox of this position, and wisdom to be gleaned for both abolitionists who have been incarcerated and those who have not. To highlight the nuances and complexities of this kind of embodied power, I use theories from Sylvia Wynter, Hortense J. Spillers, and Jayna Brown to analyze narrative and conversational fragments from an "Imagining Black Futures" workshop series that I led in the winter of 2025.

I led the "Imagining Black Futures" workshops as a community practitioner and advocate working outside of an academic context. Participants were asked to complete a consent form indicating their willingness to be referenced in this paper, and all names have been changed. I show, through my analysis of the workshop series itself, its attendant power dynamics, and the artifacts that we created during it, that compensated spaces for shared and embodied meaning-making make it possible to hold the tension between survival and resistance at the center of abolitionist work. Compensated, community-based literacy work rooted in queer Black radical imagination and embodiment practices resists carceral logics, honors the realities of people navigating them, and represents an important but under-theorized area of abolitionist literacy.

This article has four parts. I offer a literature review that positions abolitionist literacies within the context of Black feminist theory and queer Black literacies. I bring theorists like Wynter, Spillers, and Brown into conversation with scholarship in literacy studies to frame queer Black radical imagination as an abolitionist literacy practice. Next, I explain the methods behind the work we did during the "Imagining Black Futures" workshop series. I discuss the material conditions, pedagogical setup, and content of the workshops. I share my analysis of artifacts from the workshops—fragments of conversation and participant writing that exemplify the tension between literacy normativity and abolitionist dreaming, and serve as a form of abolitionist literacy. Lastly, I discuss the ways in which this community-driven approach contributes to the work of using literacy practices to begin to make prisons obsolete.

Rationale: Pay Black People to Do Radical Imagination and Literacies Work

There are precious few moments when Black people, outside of academic contexts, are paid to participate in literacy work that critically engages with and intervenes in carceral logics. These logics include pervasive narratives that define wealth in terms of scarcity through a capitalist lens, create and maintain systems of precarity, and require systems of domination and harm to function (Davis, *Obsolete*; Gilmore; Rodríguez, *Abolition as Praxis*; Kaba). Carceral logics are a central component of what Cedric Robinson has termed "racial capitalism." Racial capitalism employs various forms of violence including slavery, imperialism, and genocide in the service of upholding both racism and capitalism (Robinson). Jodi Melamed expands on this term, explaining that racial capitalism is a "technology of antirelationality" that functions by "producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (77) and separates people of color from one another in order to make it challenging for us to work together to change conditions of oppression. The work of many Black feminist theorists asserts that Black people were and continue to be excluded from Western definitions of humanity, are categorically denied subjectivity, and are therefore ideally positioned to rethink the very concept of what it means to be a human and do human things (e.g., Brown; Musser; Spillers; Wynter).

Perversely, even while being denied humanity (setting aside, for the moment, the radical potential of such a posture), people impacted by the criminal legal system are required to be conversant in specific and dehumanizing forms of literacy normativity in order to survive racial capitalism. Stories of redemption act as currency in efforts ranging from making parole, to appeasing probation officers, to obtaining employment. Denied opportunities for employment, many formerly incarcerated people, understandably, don the mantle of small business owners and entrepreneurs, further cementing their reliance on notions of meritocracy, scarcity, and precarity. In the interest of finding housing, formerly incarcerated people may find it most effective to articulate their stories through the lens of criminality and redemption. They may find that the most effective narrative about their incarceration asserts that they have worked to change themselves from bad criminals into good citizens, often through

some combination of individual hard labor, punishment, and moral achievement. It is understandable to engage in literacy normativity as a prerequisite for material survival. Yet, in much the same way that engagement in respectability politics serves both as a tool of social acceptance/security while also undermining Black and/or working-class humanity, the literacy normativity of carceral logics maintains a tangible and meaningful, but fleeting, illusion of material security, while simultaneously perpetuating a system that dehumanizes and causes ongoing harm.

Abolitionist theory-building is severely hindered by material priorities like paying the rent, the light bill, the grocery bill, and, for those impacted by the criminal legal system, the fines, fees, and many costs of coerced participation in their own surveillance and punishment. In order to even consider abolitionist futures and imagining, people who are currently or formerly incarcerated, as well as those who are threatened in ongoing and sometimes daily ways by the potential of incarceration, must be compensated to participate in practicing restorative literacies. Alas, even when moments of localized theory-building and discussion do occur, such efforts are generally underfunded and undervalued as literacy practices. Carceral logics pervade popular culture, consumer culture, and the systems of education where Black students are taught whether our intellectual contributions matter. The ubiquity of these logics leads many to doubt the importance and even possibility of building alternative theories.

Black communities and individuals have formed rich rhetorical and literacy practices both within and outside of institutional spaces (e.g., Richardson; Kynard; Muhammad and Haddix). In many instances, such literacies encompass far more than written words. These include embodied communicative skills, aesthetics, and reading abilities that function as tools of analysis, create structures of safety and belonging, critique the status quo, and subvert dominance and oppression both theoretically and as a daily practice (Brown; Kynard; Musser; Richardson). These are the kinds of restorative literacy practices that are possible within the context of radical queer Black imagination. Importantly, and perhaps so mundane as to be obvious, the majority of these literacies involve unpaid and underrecognized labor. Nevertheless, queer Black abolitionist dreaming is crucial to the goal of abolition, worthy of increased attention and funding, and central to the development of abolitionist literacies as a topic of study.

Queer Black Feminist Imagination and Abolitionist Literacies as Celebration

I built this project drawing on literature within literacy studies, abolitionist theory and abolitionist literacies, and Black feminist theory to understand and guide community literacies work at the intersection of abolition, embodiment, and radical Black imagination. Abolitionist work asks not only for an end to prisons (and many other forms of violence and domination) but also for the creation of new stories, logics, and ways of being and imagining.

Abolitionist literacies are literacy practices that resist carceral logics of anti-blackness and punishment, and work to build alternative worlds that privilege queer

and black modes of meaning making, promote safety and community healing. Abolitionist literacies articulate sustainable models of power rooted in the recognition that those who have been harmed by systemic injustice are well positioned to create alternatives to carceral logics. In their thoughtful work about the limitations of representation in the context of prison literacy programs, Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi acknowledge that such programs might not explicitly call for abolition and may inadvertently perpetuate the prison industrial complex (Hinshaw and Jacobi). Abolitionist literacies resist prison reform as a categorical impossibility and call for both an end to prisons and the creation of conditions that make them obsolete (e.g., Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad; Cavallaro; Hutchinson; Middleton). This approach demands a self-reflexive stance that critiques the limits of conditions as they are. It works directly with and foregrounds the work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. It also revises our pedagogy, practices of collaboration, and norms of relational engagement, while troubling the complexities of power and identity formation.

Relationships between people who have been incarcerated and those who have not—as well as between people who are currently incarcerated and those who are not—won't immediately bring down prison walls, but they do create a porosity in the metaphorical walls of the prison that allows for different power dynamics to emerge (Lewis). In my time working in community with formerly incarcerated community members, the power dynamics shifted insofar as I brought academic and professional knowledge to a table where lived experience was of equal or greater value to my academic and professional offerings. Abolitionists remind us that we have to create opportunities for proximity to reduce the social, physical, and psychological distance among those of us who are currently incarcerated, those who have been incarcerated, and those who have not. The good news is that this isn't new work. Prison abolition scholarship has paved extensive pathways for abolitionist literacies to draw from (e.g., Davis, *Obsolete*; Davis, *Women*; Gilmore; Kaba; Rodríguez).

Many existing studies of prison literacies are related to the writing instruction and outcomes that happen in prison writing programs (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad; Berry; Cavallaro; Hutchinson; Kocik, O'Ceallaigh, Fettig, and Novotny; Lewis; Middleton). These studies are key to creating conditions that make prisons unnecessary, including thinking critically about existing social and political power dynamics at the nexus of prison literacy and abolition, rethinking narratives that define the relationship between citizenship and literacy, and theory-building around abolitionist literacy practices more broadly. Abolitionist literacies propose the twin premises that composition and literacy studies have an ethical imperative to work towards abolition and that literacy work requires a shift from a focus on literacy primarily as a skill that allows more effective participation in the carceral state to literacy as a practice of reshaping the ways in which we see ourselves and what is possible for human relationality.

Similarly, Black literacy—and more recently, queer Black literacy—scholarship advocates for systemic change. These fields of study assert that existing literacies uphold racial violence, and that we should foreground Black and queer ways of reading and rendering the world around us (e.g., Kynard; Pritchard, *Fashioning Lives*;

Richardson). Black feminist studies spotlights the foundations of dehumanization under racial capitalism, challenges violence and oppression in their many forms, and offers alternatives. Much of Black feminist work is abolitionist insofar as it amplifies possibilities outside of the foundations of the carceral state. Putting abolitionist literacies into conversation with scholarship rooted in queer Black feminist studies yields interesting opportunities for literacy theories and practices that sit in the fraught space between what has and what has not yet been created, while articulating possibilities under conditions of oppression. These kinds of literacy practices do abolitionist work by foregrounding the literacy practices of people with expertise in dehumanization and exclusion, and by directing the energies of literacy workers towards troubling and dismantling categorical exclusion and using imagination as a tool to read, imagine, and write new worlds.

In "No Humans Involved," Wynter traces the lineage of the classification "No Humans Involved/NHI" used by the Los Angeles police department to deny unemployed Black men their rights as humans. NHI serves as a proxy for her to reflect on the ways in which traditional humanist frameworks leave Black people outside of the definition of human (Wynter). This denial of humanity by categorical exclusion is a legacy of the violence of slavery and the subsequent carceral logics of racial capitalism. Many thinkers have, alongside Wynter, considered the impossibility of speaking to the impact of slavery and its afterlife on bodies, as well as the language made im/possible in its wake and the methods of circumnavigating these limitations to find sites of possibility (e.g., Philip, *Blank*; Sharpe; Spillers). M. NourbeSe Philip outlines a key contradiction in her use of the English language in the wake of slavery:

> This language . . . was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I can now function. . . . I begin from a position of extreme distrust of language and do not believe that english [sic]—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. (*Blank*, 55)

Inspired by Philip's poems, with language scattered across the page representing the chaos of the hold, humans becoming commerce, and voices and people lost to the bottom of the ocean during the middle passage, we might consider moments of breaking conventions of language as abolitionist fragments—sites where speakers/writers let go of the expectation of finding full meaning and clarity with the goal. Abolitionist fragments, rather than conveying something complete, represent a gesture towards deeper understanding. I suggest that a queer Black abolitionist approach to literacy requires us to pay closer attention to the work happening in such moments of fracture—not as errors to be corrected, or as thoughts demanding completion, but as an art of rupture that alerts us to a quality of embodied discomfort and moves us closer to breaking carceral logics and designing liberatory ones.

Black feminist scholars have established ways of reading bodies, flesh, and modes of imagination that arguably frame qualities like hieroglyphics of the flesh, post-human imagination, and the realm of the sensual in ways that are, if not literacies themselves,

so closely linked with literacy practices that they require further consideration within the context of composition and literacy studies. Here, I am advocating for a perspective of literacy work as a kind of art most fruitfully practiced in collaboration with communities forced to define themselves outside of Western notions of humanity. I use, as a starting point, the work of two theorists who have taken a different approach to understanding what it means to exist in a body that has been defined outside of the dominant definitions of what a human can be and do. I argue that some of the intellectual explorations of Spillers and Brown function as literacy theories, even though not explicitly framed as such, that offer firm ground upon which to build a framework for queer Black abolitionist literacies.

Black queer abolitionist imagination is a fundamental literacy practice that reconstructs ways of knowing and being in the world. Brown articulates specific limitations and modes of imagination that contribute to abolitionist literacy practices: "Dystopia, the horrific terms of being black in our earthly condition, is a starting point for critique; dystopia forms the terrain of our existence. But forms of black life and liveliness are claimed and created in the terror" (1).

These words were a meditation for me in the year prior to my organizing the Radical Black Imagining workshop—the paradox of asserting Black "life and liveliness" in conditions of terror. I wanted to feel the full fleshiness and possibility of dwelling in what Brown refers to when she gestures toward utopia, which she defines as "the moments when those of us untethered from the hope of rights, recognition, or redress here on earth celebrate ourselves as elements in a cosmic effluvium" (1–2). What would a quality of celebration like that look like? What would it feel like in our individual bodies working collaboratively? Imperfect as we are, acknowledging that we don't need "rights, recognition, or redress" (Brown 2) to celebrate ourselves, it might look like me spending time with people I care about simply because of our shared experience of Blackness and commitment to curiosity about what we might create together. It would, however, also engage an embodied tension around resisting power dynamics occurring within differential relationships to knowledge about and experience within prisons.

In Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she outlines the idea of "American Grammar" wherein the Black body is a text onto which violence is inscribed physically into flesh, first through the laceration of the whip, and subsequently within the grammar of what we may now call racial capitalism—complete with judges, prisons, police, norms and dehumanizing logics. This process plays out in what she refers to as a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers 67). The hieroglyphics of the flesh extend invisibly beyond the space and time of slavery into the present carceral state. Amber Jamilla Musser takes the flesh thusly rendered by Spillers—flesh as the location where Black humans lose their subjectivity and take on the projections required to undergird systems of racial and capitalist violence—and contemplates the potential for the body's fleshiness to be a location for meaning-making. Through this meaning-making process, she argues, Black humans are able to define our selfhood through what she refers to as "brown jouissance," a process of reveling in the excess, pleasure, and vulnerability within and between the bodies and flesh of Black and brown people (Musser).

What Might This Work Look Like in Practice?

Between Fall of 2024 and Winter of 2025, as the Director of Narrative Change at a small grassroots organization where I worked at the time—Community Spring—I co-created and co-facilitated a series of workshops called "Imagining Black Futures." I drafted the Imagining Black Futures workshops with Spillers's hieroglyphics of the flesh, Brown's utopia, and Musser's brown jouissance in mind. Workshop participants would labor together with me in playful ways, luxuriously meandering through the intellectual and aesthetic theory of many of the scholars referenced in this paper, not only experiencing our bodies as text, but writing against the grain of the "American Grammar" of racial capitalism, breaking and re-making language in the lineage of Philip, examining the areas of convergence and divergence between us all under the racializing assemblage of Blackness in some form or fashion, and producing some sort of living textual document with words, and also through our embodiment.

Community Spring (CS) is a nonprofit that aims to disrupt the cycle of poverty and incarceration by creating access to guaranteed income and supporting community members in building power necessary to meet their basic needs through a guaranteed income program and various literacy-based community workshops. Approximately 50% of CS employees are directly impacted by the criminal legal system. The organization supports justice-impacted community members in building skills and power critical to transforming unjust systems and creates a community where those who have survived carceral systems are able to challenge dominant narratives and build a culture that resists the carceral logic of racial capitalism. The goal of the workshop series was to engage Black community members, both those who were formerly incarcerated and those with impacted family and friends, in theory-building; community-building through enlivening conversation; and worldmaking through study of Black radical imagination, embodiment, carceral logics, and counternarratives with the power to end mass incarceration.

A total of five people participated in the entire two-part, six-day workshop series, with an additional three also participating in portions of the six-day workshop as well as related narrative-change and storytelling workshops that have informed this article. Three of the five workshop participants, and six of the abolitionist storytelling workshop participants, had been incarcerated for varying lengths of time in prisons and/or jails, ranging from months to decades, and everyone had loved ones and family members who had been previously incarcerated. I include myself as a participant primarily because, although it is impossible to flatten the hierarchy between myself as a facilitator and the rest of the group, I entered the workshop with the same level of curiosity and uncertainty as everyone else. We recorded audio throughout the workshop as well as written texts so that I could return to review and analyze both the audio and the texts. The sample size of the group, while admittedly small, offers a glimpse of the possibilities for and potential promise of future related projects.

Through analysis of these workshop artifacts, which I refer to as fragments, I reflect on the ways that formerly incarcerated Black storytellers and impacted communities navigate the tensions of differential power (between those with and

without direct incarceration experience), carceral literacies, embodiment, and the abolitionist potential of queer Black radical imagination. The workshop series was structured as a six-day experience with each day consisting of two hours of discussion and writing prompts. I wanted to attend to the embodied and social aspects of literacy work before moving into writing practice. I frontloaded the curriculum with theory, foregrounding embodied practices and queer Black feminist theories of storytelling. On day one, we opened with an exercise that paired a writing prompt—"What are the first stories you remember being told? / What are the first stories you remember reading?"—with an embodiment activity. After we all responded to the prompt, most of us shared some insight from what we had written. Then, I led a body awareness activity to invite us to become aware of the relationship between what we were reading, hearing, and remembering, and the physical sensations associated with these various modes of literacy. The goal of beginning in this way was threefold: firstly, to lay the foundation for body awareness throughout the workshop; secondly, to welcome participants' awareness of their physical reactions/sensations and ensure that they were in touch with moments when they might wish or need to step away from the group; and lastly, to build awareness of the relationships between literacy, community, and embodiment. On that first day, we continued with readings from incarcerated writers and formerly incarcerated writers—notably, "Belly Song" by Etheridge Knight, which served as a bridge to talk about bodies, sensation, prison writing, and the relationship between narrative and storytelling.

The remaining days of the workshop proceeded in similar fashion, with embodied exercises; discussions around quotes from Wynter, Brown, Musser, and several abolitionist artists and writers, interspersed with writing prompts, writing, and more discussion. The intention was to create a finished document articulating a collaborative abolitionist future, what that would look like in concrete terms, and what it would feel like in our bodies. As the facilitator, I was open about my own queer Black embodiment, and the ways that this informed my selection of texts and media for the workshop. Participants also shaped the workshop by bringing in some of their own poems, media, and theories. Whereas the first three days of the workshop were heavy on theory, discussion, and body awareness, and light on writing, the final three days relied more on contemplation and written reflection intended to yield a form of written story or cohesive body of written work created in collaboration between participants. In the final days of the seminar, we moved toward the concept of worldbuilding, speculative fiction, and abolitionist possibilities. For the culminating project, we began with the prompt: "Share one possibility this workshop has inspired you to imagine and work with a partner to write that world into reality." While the discussions and writing in response to the prompt and the theory/worldbuilding we did during the workshop were collaborative, the writing we accomplished was largely individual work that we discussed together.

Sites of Contradiction and Possibility: Workshop Fragment Analysis

The imagination and worldbuilding potential of each person who participated in the experimental Imagining Black Futures workshop is rooted in innumerable stories and experiences, many of which involve one of two things: incarceration in some form, and/or the felt sense of claustrophobia within the narratives that America tells about Black and brown people and people impacted by the justice system. These narratives ripple out past the walls of prisons, perpetuating harm that has a uniformly negative but differential impact on incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and not-yet-incarcerated people. We worked both within and against dominant narratives and toward modes of experience that engaged ways of knowing and being that we haven't yet achieved. There were limitations to what was possible in the short time we had together. We articulated a vision for the world we wanted to see without yet being able to articulate the concrete path to arriving there. Recognizing both the power of embodiment and the presence of embodied trauma in our shared space, we operated within an embodied awareness because we agreed that attending to awareness of embodiment was important, but we continued to have questions about when it may feel appropriate to foreground embodiment, and when may be perceived as unsafe and unwelcome.

For the remainder of this article, I will speak exclusively in conversation with the writing and ideas of people who have experienced both Blackness and incarceration. The workshop series and the theory behind it made restorative literacies practice possible on three axes: firstly, that of written text; secondly, through the embodied grammar of Spillers and Musser; and thirdly, informed to some extent by the language-bending imperative of Philip, this embodied grammar as a space of utopian imagining. According to Brown, "forms of black life and liveliness are claimed and created in the terror" (Brown 1). They are also created through the speculation made possible within a subjectivity that, by necessity, occurs in the communal space of "not being" [not seen as fully human, but able to imagine ourselves as other than human].

As I addressed earlier in this article, people who are or have been incarcerated can experience tangible benefits from carceral logics and incumbent narratives. Such narratives are normative literacies that can be traded as a kind of currency. Their material consequences, while opening doors within the context of carceral citizenship, also close doors of possibility within the context of radical queer Black abolitionist literacy practices. Many of the people I have worked with have expressed a deep sense of connection to notions of Christian redemption and the idea that they have, through painstaking individual labor, achieved a transformative mindset that serves as a way of keeping them out of prison in perpetuity. The Bible is, at least in numerous locations in the South, the only book made available to people in prison. As we will see in some of the following fragments, carceral logics of individualism, bootstrapping, and rising above the proverbial riff raff, serve as a protection against the ever-present threat of re-incarceration, while agitating an impulse towards a world that renders carceral logics unnecessary.

The following language excerpts emerged from the workshop series. It is my hope that each fragment can be seen in its fullness. I am claiming the fragment as a restorative practice of literacy. I refer to them as fragments not solely because they are partial, but to capture the complexity of the broken wholeness that happens as we are forced to use inadequate language and logic to make abolitionist meaning. I argue that working in broken and sometimes conflicting logics is a step towards abolition. My aim is for the opacity of the paradox within some of the statements to be read as a testament to the labor happening in the slippage between carceral logic as a hieroglyphics of the flesh, and the process of reaching for abolitionist logics from beneath dystopian pressures.

I arrange the fragments into two themes. The first theme entails "sites of contradiction," wherein normative and restorative logics are expressed in opposition to one another in ways that point towards a third path forward for abolitionist visioning—one that holds contradiction and conflict as inevitable and productive in the process of radical imagining. The second theme comprises "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations" that reside squarely within the realm of the possible which have not yet been achieved. These "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations" could be defined as "forms of black life and liveliness [that] are claimed and created in the terror" (Brown 1), which came to light in the space of mutual recognition and possibility of the workshop series.

Sites of Contradiction

1. "I really think we need to imagine an alternative to prisons." (Amara)
2. "Sometimes I feel like some people really should be in prison." (Amara)
3. "I never knew how to work until I went to prison. I'm grateful that I learned how to work." (Amara)
4. "It's better to be getting paid on the outside than to be working for free in prison." (Amara)
5. "In some ways, I was more free in prison. / When I got out, it was terrifying all the decisions I had to make." (Nelson)
6. "When I was going into prison, I was afraid that people would hurt me." (Octavius)
7. "I found a community in prison that I didn't have outside of it." (Octavius)
8. "I was healthier in some ways in prison, physically for sure, and in some ways mentally too. I read books. / I don't really read as much as I did when I was in prison." (Octavius)
9. "The biggest thing I changed was my mindset and nobody could do that for me other than me." (Nelson)
10. "We really do need each other. No one person can do it alone." (Nelson)
11. "Yes, Black people need each other, but I'm not buying it about the collective thing. I just want to play the devil's advocate for a second. No one is looking out for me but me right now. So when we see Trump in office again, that's because those of us at the bottom of the ladder are not feeling the impact of your affirmative action, of your DEI work. I will take care of myself and my family regardless of what the government does. Individualism is important." (James)

All of the above fragments represent sites of contradiction wherein an ethic and a longing for abolition meets the pressures of lived experience. James's, Nelson's, and Octavius's feeling of freedom inside prison were not a result of the liberatory potential of the prison; rather, it is a testament to some of the oppressive realities of the lived experience of Black men under racial capitalism. As in Spillers's *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, Nelson describes an experience in which carceral logics are built into the experiences of Black and brown people, whether they are in prison or outside. The very notions of freedom and liberation are troubled when community is more possible in a space that operates as the end goal of Black dehumanization. However, even while James pushed back against the communal logic of the workshops, he was a willing participant who laughed and imagined alongside the rest of us. If abolition were to demand that James reside in a single ideological location (either affirming the liberatory potential of collectivity or refusing it), he wouldn't be able to participate in his full complexity, or articulate the depth and complexity of his reality. His resistance spoke to an uncomfortable friction—a conflict that inspired more than a few moments of embodied discomfort within the group—that needed to be held rather than flattened.

In Octavius's fragments, the community he found in prison wasn't made possible because prisons are glorious places conducive to forming community; instead, his insight suggests that the carceral conditions created on both sides of the prison walls constrain community-building potential, but do so unsuccessfully. In his analysis, there is a mandate for community inside of prisons to negate the fear and terror of carceral conditions and the violence of corrections officers. As in Brown's *Black Utopias*, Black people have often created spaces of possibility for themselves even within the constraints of racism and capitalism. This is not to suggest that we maintain the status quo, but rather to say that Octavius's fragment regarding community within prisons holds abolitionist possibility and is a worthy foundation to further theoretical consideration *precisely because* it holds a logical conflict and pushes readers to critique a system in which it's easier to build community while inside of prison than it is outside.

James's comment resisting my own hasty dismissal of rhetorics of meritocracy is a valid pushback to my failure to recognize that, for people cycling between grind culture and prison, collective support is hard to fathom. I read this fragment as a call for more opportunities to experience the physical sensation of doing worldbuilding work together. In this moment of fissure, there was something to be learned from the tone of his voice, movements, expressions and gestures that would not be available to people reading the words alone. The tension represented in James's fragment, as well as the tension in all of the fragments above, was a plea for understanding and action. Embodied literacy practices such as these call for greater consideration. People who have experienced incarceration are central to reading and writing an abolitionist world into existence. Some of that work has to happen in ways that are physical and embodied. The fragmentary nature of the tensions above is a testament to the fact that Black and brown people very much hold abolitionist possibilities that can only be upheld as a process of becoming rather than a finalized text. This "process of becoming" is uncomfortable. It can be felt in the room as it's being discussed. Although it would likely have been more comfortable to shut it down, doing so would have followed a prison logic

of containment. I am inspired by this awareness to advocate for more tolerance of messiness and uncertainty in not only abolitionist literacies, but all literacies pushing toward social justice aims.

In participant fragments that made meaning as "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations," they pondered direct changes to Black people's current lived experiences under racial capitalism in response to a series of writing prompts about carceral logics. They also articulated explicit visions for abolition.

Sites of Possibility

1. "Young people really need an alternative that's about healing. So many of them are out there hurting and wind up in prison because they didn't have anything else better to do with their lives." (Nelson)
2. "When it comes down to it, it's about attention. We got to pay more attention to one another. Everyone needs that." (Richard)
3. "I cried the day that I left. I had been back to prison so many times in my life. The guards would say things like, 'see you next time' and I knew it was true. But the last time I left, I knew I couldn't go back. I didn't know how I was gonna make it on the outside, but I knew I wasn't going back, and I haven't." (Nelson)

Abolitionist Articulations

1. "In our radical Black future, prisons don't exist anymore because there are adequate resources, a collectivist mindset, violent crime doesn't exist, when people do violent crime people are taken to rehabilitation, people are housed and focused on helping rather than punishment. There's more collaboration." (Amara's worldbuilding narrative)
2. "I am imagining a world where crime doesn't exist and all needs are met through government support. Crime can be mediated before it even happens because people are given mental health support throughout their lives." (Octavius's worldbuilding narrative)
3. "I'm a big dude. I'm 6'4", it's been a long time since anyone lifted me off of my feet, but when I imagine the world without prisons, you know that feeling you get when someone picks you up and you're carefree and at ease? When the pressure is lifted off of you? That's how I feel." (Octavius's worldbuilding narrative)

In the fragments above, we find articulations of sites of possibility alongside overtly abolitionist articulations inspired by a series of facilitated dialogues about topics ranging from Black radical joy and queer liberation, to writing prompts about lived experience, Black and queer abolitionist imagining, and embodiment. These fragments are steps in the process of moving towards abolition. They serve as an antidote to the literacy normativities which, materially useful though they can be, limit the potential for Black liberatory imagination, and ultimately, limit the potential for all humans to be defined in ways that exist outside of logics of oppression and incarceration.

Discussion

Embodied work at the intersection of literacy and Black radical imagination requires trust that can only safely be built over time. Holding conflict and unknowability is far more challenging, if it's even possible, when trust hasn't been built. In this project, trust and safety was made possible by direct compensation for theorizing and worldbuilding. Within our current context of precarity, material compensation for people impacted by the criminal legal system is a key component of abolitionist pedagogy. Workshop participants reflected that the relationships they cultivated during the "Imagining Black Futures" workshop deepened as a result of our time together. Importantly, the scholarship was secondary to the worldbuilding we were doing and continue to do in our everyday lives. Our work centered a conversation between community-driven theory and academic scholarship that foregrounded the community's potential to build theory. This approach is foundational to an ethics of abolition. During the workshop, we weren't aiming to "create a discursive space" or "engage in practices of literacy" as primary goals of imagining Black futures. Instead, this space and related practices arose from the primary goal of enjoying ourselves together while thinking about serious things. Laughter was very much present in our space together, intermingling with heavy conversations and writing about dystopia.

Engaging with the full complexity of the ways in which carceral logics function in the lives of people who are formerly incarcerated (and therefore also within the context of prison abolition more broadly) is both challenging and absolutely essential to the goal of participatory abolitionist literacy work, especially the work that takes place at the intersection of abolitionist ideals of activists like myself and the lived experience of the people I work with. Engagement with contradictions and carceral logics ranging from meritocracy and worthiness to criminalized individualism is central to abolitionist literacies work. This kind of engagement demands greater attentiveness to embodied experience within the context of literacy work. We cannot simply gloss over physical sensations. Instead, if we are to hold complexity and conflict in our classrooms and community spaces, we have to build our pedagogy around attending openly and explicitly to those sensations. I welcome others to pursue the idea of embodied literacies as a conversation between embodied sensation and the pleasures and discomforts of considering the complexities of disagreement, unknowability, and uncertainty. Further explorations of embodied literacy honor the kind of work we did in the Imagining Black Futures workshop series as well as future work on abolitionist literacies.

Racial capitalism ensures that the hostilities of the prison industrial complex will be felt by children, families, and communities, regardless of whether they have direct experiences of incarceration. This is even more so the case once people who have survived some combination of racism, poverty, homophobia, transphobia, and patriarchy become involved in the violence of the carceral state. For many people who are formerly incarcerated, even while it feels freeing to imagine a world without prisons, carceral logics hold a monetary value and cultural currency, and become a key part of a post-incarceration identity narrative that serves as a protective mechanism against the ever-present threat of reincarceration. Literacy practitioners have to work within

the complexities presented by the interweaving of freedom dreams with internalized carceral logics.

In our current moment, it is crucial that more of us perceive and acknowledge literacy work as abolitionist in nature, find locations where abolitionist literacies are practiced, and theorize the work being done in those spaces. It will not be possible to strategize our way toward abolition without being together in new ways. This study posits queer Black radical imagination as an abolitionist literacy practice that warrants more attention and funding. This is a practice that requires spaces for Black people to claim the title of theorists, through embodied experience and fragments of text that represent full and complex modes of thinking. We must, regardless of our relationship to the academy or our direct experience with the carceral state, take seriously the multidimensionality and sensory complexity of our discursive practices. Abolitionist literacies require that we all make meaning and take action from our understanding of both our individual and our collective bodies, the shapes we take, and the ways that we collectively assign value to our embodied experiences.

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Border Checkpoint as Literacy Technology

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KEYWORDS

borders; checkpoint; Palestine; spatial literacy; Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

ABSTRACT

This paper draws from an array of primary sources, such as the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) periodical *Frontline*, government documents, and news reports of CBP brutality, to discuss the ways that border checkpoints function as technologies that impart everyday literacies of race, citizenship, and class onto all who move through them. Drawing on the work of Jay Dolmage, Kate Vieira, and others, this paper melds public literacy and cultural geography to examine the border checkpoint's influence as a form of literacy technology with particular attention to the Santa Fe Bridge checkpoint between Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. I argue that the border checkpoint is a kind of spatial literacy technology that forms and typifies interactions at population scales and is a place where the racialized norms of inclusion/exclusion become routine. Vieira's "documentary border" and the concrete border are made one in its operations. In examining the border checkpoint in this way, I hope to contribute to our awareness of one of the most powerful shaping tools in the oppressive subjective life on the US–Mexico border, an understanding that is crucial to any abolitionist reckoning with the hegemonic literacies that produce so much harm in our communities.

Introduction

Some years ago, I was on a bus from Los Angeles to El Paso, sailing through the New Mexico dark, looking out at the passing land: all creosote and hill punctuated by the silhouettes of rural homes and abandoned structures. In that darkness, road signs told a story of rote progression: Hobbs—Deming—Truth or Consequences. I nodded off against the glass and the passing signs, and woke up to fluorescent light as bright as noon-day sun. Now amidst concrete barricades, uniformed men searched and moved methodically. Families sat and watched. Dogs alongside handlers raced through the undercarriage of our bus until one started barking. We were outside of Las Cruces. A uniformed man announced in Spanish then English that we had to present our documents: visas, passports, drivers' licenses, all came up. An officer climbed the stairs into the bus holding what appeared to be no more than a half-ounce of marijuana in a loose cellophane bag. Hardly a smuggler's payload. The migra were prompt in the work of sorting out its owner. The "culprit" was found to be an elderly Mexican woman who, speaking no English, meekly held up a California medical card and said something in Spanish about her arthritis. He explained to her that this card did not give her the right to transport the grass over state lines, let alone to be sitting there in front of him. Instead of being granted some temporary mercy (confiscation and reprimand), she was hauled off of our bus in handcuffs, alongside an unrelated teenager, sitting in the corner across from her, who had no identification at all. Both were left to uncertain fates at that checkpoint, miles from any family or friends. At this same checkpoint, some decades earlier, Leslie Marmon Silko found herself caught in an escalating tension where the presence of contraband (her own marijuana) and the potential of violence hung thick in the air: "I thought how easy it would be for the Border Patrol to shoot us and leave our bodies and car beside the highway, like so many bodies found in these parts and ascribed to 'drug runners'" (73). What lies between these moments—Silko's, mine, and those of my fellow passengers—are the heightened states of uncertainty and vulnerability. It is not just *that* checkpoint, but the *form* of the checkpoint, that is the issue here.

In this article, I venture an analysis of this form by examining

1) the theoretical grounds on which the checkpoint can be read as literacy technology with the assistance of Annette Vee, Kate Vieira, and others;
2) the historical durability of the checkpoint form and its elaborations over time, by cross-referencing Jay Dolmage's work on Ellis Island with a contemporaneous checkpoint between El Paso, Texas, and Juárez, Mexico; and
3) the way the space, people, and routine violences of the checkpoint today constitute a literacy technology that produces a global geography of borders.

I conclude with an open-ended meditation on what these aspects of the checkpoint mean for composition studies and compositionists as we grapple with the workings of this literacy technology going forward.

In an era of runaway state retrenchment and an increasing spiral into anti-migrant panic, checkpoints have become a central literacy both "important to governance" and "infrastructural" (Vee 44) to everyday life. I begin by extending Vee's considerations of computer programming literacy to the border checkpoint as a form dependent

on the border's certifying power. As Vee argues, "[c]omputer programming has a lot in common with textual literacy—historical trajectory, social shaping, affordances for communication, and connections to civic discourse . . . the refrain of 'literacy' in reference to computer programming is not only apt because of these parallels, but . . . [because] our definitions of literacy must shift to accommodate this new form of digital writing" (43). Checkpoints exhibit this same shaping of trajectory, sociality, and communication, as well as operating on their own binary logic of admission and denial. For those directly and indirectly impacted, the checkpoint forms a core technological node in the establishment of borders, and with this, it enjoins literacy in a way we must shift to accommodate. To quote Vieira, "Literacy, experienced in [bordered] communities materially, is a navigational technology. It places and displaces. It orients and disorients. It includes and it alienates. These are not metaphors for literacy. They are active verbs that correspond with the development of the nation state, the transnational post, and systems of social inequality" ("On the Social" 30).

The significance of this argument for abolitionist and compositionist scholars is in how our own work can chart the impact of checkpoints on our daily lives, and how the checkpoint in its technical features across national contexts can inform our understanding of the global border complex. The border checkpoint is a literacy technology that dictates the substance of human and non-human relationships from movement to stasis in ways that are consistent enough to be named, typified, and ultimately resisted.

Checkpoint as Literacy Technology

This section draws on work across abolitionist scholarship, as well as composition and technical communication, to pin down the theoretical basis of the checkpoint as a literacy technology. In articulating this, I draw from Vee as well as from Dave Clark in "Shaped and Shaping Tools." I follow Clark's working definition of technology, in which he quotes Thomas P. Hughes by describing it as "'craftsmen, mechanics, inventors, engineers, designers, and scientists using tools, machines, and knowledge to create and control a human-built world consisting of artifacts and systems,'" which "emphasizes not the tools themselves, but their creative design, implementation, and use, paralleling Aristotle's definition of *techne* as practical arts" (89). I will accordingly try to examine the way that people—the designers, enforcers, and subjects of these checkpoints—articulate and make meaning (or are *made* meaningful) through the motives of the apparatus. I use rhetorical analysis to analyze the problems and issues raised by this technology through the examination of publicly available discourse, in both primary and secondary sources, as in the case of government texts, the CBP periodical, publicized killings, and available historiography. I will do so by charting the checkpoint in the US throughout history from El Paso to Ellis Island, and mapping out its global connections, such as the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the spectacularization of sea- and desert-borne migrant death, the intensification of anti-migrant panics in the United States, and the Iraq War.

Checkpoints are deceptively simple technologies, apparatuses "common to all nation states" and the "prime establishment[s] responsible for regulating transboundary movements and enforcing the selective permeability of borders" (Ngo and Hung 179). This tight organization of queues, inspection machines, agents, papers, cameras, holding cells, and their arrangement for maximum efficiency in screening, surveilling, admitting, denying, or detaining human and material flows, comprise a whole technical form that occupies every geographic chokepoint that the state can identify from airports to land ports and seaports. The role of the checkpoint in public life has grown only more pronounced and sophisticated, particularly in the wake of Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill," which stands as "one of the largest investments in U.S. border security in history with over $21 billion allocated for border modernization, including record funding for biometrics and artificial intelligence" (Beebe). The exponentially inflating ICE budget and the deployment of the checkpoint from the District of Columbia to Los Angeles, California, and so on, speak to its overt and subtle influences on all quarters of public life, which show no sign of abating in their potency (Toropin).

The checkpoint is a technical form, a specific means of arranging people and things in space which inscribes all that moves through and around it. This power of arrangement is why they are so important in state building on the US–Mexico, Mexico–Guatemala, and Palestine–"Israel" borders, and elsewhere. This core utility allows us to see the checkpoint as a distributed and internally consistent form across the fields of abolitionist and decolonial struggle, which enables us to track what border theorist Harsha Walia terms the "homology" between "domestic and foreign conquest" (59). The border checkpoint is a technology that regulates transnational movement itself. It performs an array of actions that include not only the shaping of Border Patrol identity, but, outside of "members of the organization," the self-disclosure of all who pass through, including at varying degrees of peril citizens, citizens in the process of actions deemed criminal, people with their papers "in order," and undocumented migrants. In its array of barricades, its refined techniques of crowd control, its modular grafting on over the last century of emerging technologies from photography to biometrics, and its routinized rituals of submission and justifications of violence, the checkpoint is the literacy technology *par excellence* of what Vieira calls the "documentary border" (*American* 10). The checkpoint is a sociomaterial form in the same way Vieira articulates for literacy, which becomes a prime structural nexus that inveighs and produces relations and actions of "assimilation . . . authority, legitimacy, and mobility" (*American* 142).

Border checkpoints as a technology certify motive insofar as they set down what counts as legitimate motive, as expressed in the quintessential question of the customs agent: "What is the purpose of your visit?" In their arrangement of arms, barricades, fencing, and their attendant technologies, border checkpoints were at one time eugenic inspections focused on outward signs of dysgenic burden such as intelligence, disability, and hygiene, and today the mass tagging of biometrics and modern data science. They mediate movement and enforce zones of sovereignty, becoming inconveniences for some and hard barriers for others. They are an inscriptive technology that produces a hierarchy of meaning in the lives of people who move through them by collating

the entire apparatus of visas, passports, preferential crossing programs, and inspection. They are key geographic reference points for the shifting status of the human—movement itself is coded as criminal or potentially dangerous if it circumvents the checkpoint networks. They are a key form in producing the image of a stable national community, closed and guarded from threat. In this role they have become a site for a great deal of specialized knowledge and technical training, from CBP agents themselves to engineers and data scientists who produce the kinds of hardware and software that allow them to function. This training has meant that US checkpoints have accrued a cottage industry for global training wherever border security concerns are identified. For these reasons, border checkpoints demand rhetorical reading as an apparatus unto themselves, as literacy technologies with consequence (Vieira, "On the Social" 30).

The literacies enjoined by the checkpoint are in all cases spatial, because the checkpoint is a geographic apparatus first and foremost. All checkpoints are *chokepoints* that serve to funnel people through as identified threats or non-threats in the same turn as they code the land. The geographer Rasul A. Mowatt writes that cities are organized by technologies of threat identification and control:

> The city by design has taken . . . identified populations and has discursively framed them as threats to the safety of the remaining populace . . . . [T]he city has dealt with and continues to deal with those populations deemed violent with continued blows of violence with social, psychological, and physical death of their person and the people and spaces that they have held dear—a settler colonial city project that continues its occupation of stolen lands and dispossession of stolen peoples. (249)

What Mowatt identifies in the city is core to the function of the checkpoint as technology.

Checkpoints as a literacy technology encode the space around them as impassable except through their permission. All people, all materials, and all encircling land gain their character, from the point of inscription of the dominant, by going through or around the checkpoint. This inscription happens in part through the "social sorting" (Woods 115) of checkpoints. Rhetorician Charles Woods writes of "interlocking consent" to describe the "interlocking nature of various ToS policies [that] amplif[y] the geo-spatial elements of data privacy erosion and unethical digital surveillance via analysis of the rhetorical surveillance practices used at the U.S. Southern Border" (109). At the same turn, every border crossing is configured as implicit consent to the digitization and textualization of bodies. The checkpoint in its literate and technical force inscribes and decodes its crossers; it does not code directly as an exigence for its own being. As compositionist Walter Lucken IV wrote of literacy ideologies in terms of basic writing:

> Looking at this larger historical context enables us to see how the idea of [a] "correct" or "standard" version of languages or literacies, rather than being a description of existing literacy or language practices (those common to United States universities in this case), is in fact an

> ongoing political project that *depends on the existence of non-standard or minoritized Others as its condition of possibility.* (55, emphasis added)

In the case of the checkpoint, its literacies depend, as fundamental matter, on minoritized Others produced through its operations on space and the flows of people. It is with this basic operation of movement and land that the consequences of literacies begin.

To chart these consequences, we must root this process in history, with the assistance provided by Jay Dolmage's reading of Ellis Island in *Disabled Upon Arrival.* Dolmage's work examines Ellis Island as a rhetorical space that served as a circulation point in relations of power—that is, "how power travels through Ellis Island, but also how Ellis Island, as a space and as an idea, structures and shapes power" (9). For Dolmage, this rhetorical space, "through an industrialized choreography" (11)—constant queuing, line inspections, siphoning out for further medical inspection, expulsion, conditional acceptance—constructed the desirable and the undesirable. It inscribed immigrants by disability, race, class, sex, and other categories, which rendered their masses legible to the discourse of the nation. This processual effort was aided by the technology at the center of Dolmage's concern, photography, which he argues was enrolled by the discourse of eugenics in a case of mutual articulation—where photography created, for eugenic purposes, "a new archive and index for the sorting and classification of human bodies in this era . . . ideas about bodily fitness and defect drove the development of the technology" (72–3). The rhetorical space of Ellis Island was an active partner, then, in the development of eugenics, through its partnership with photography as an emerging technology, but its own material choreography was also actively constructing difference and vulnerability as a rhetorical nexus. In order to grasp how the work Dolmage identifies in the checkpoint travels to contemporary grounds, I next turn to the historical work of a similar checkpoint in El Paso, Texas.

From El Paso to Ellis Island

The function that Ellis Island had was consistently staged in other such spaces, as Dolmage himself gestures to, referencing the work of Alexandra Minna Stern and stating that "similar 'spectacular' techniques were also expanded for use at the border of Texas and Mexico in the first decade of the century (at El Paso, Naco, Nogales, Douglas, Tucson, Laredo, Eagle Pass, Rio Grande, Brownsville, and Hidalgo)" (21). These sites produced similar arrays of differentiation and eugenic marking: "initiation through inspection and inoculation" (Dolmage 21), through the textual training of inspectors and the technical apparatuses of photography or spatial design. Accordingly, we can expand Dolmage's analysis of Ellis Island by understanding that what he is describing is not a singular rhetorical space but rather a type of thing, a literacy technology —a border checkpoint, albeit one that is enormously loaded with symbolic meaning in the United States imaginary. Dolmage does not theorize such sites as technologies unto themselves, despite their similarity, because his primary concern is understanding disability by engaging with photography as a technology animated by eugenics and its

attendant texts of bodily interpretation. However, we could easily expand this by taking one of Dolmage's cross-referenced rhetorical spaces—El Paso.

Given the era *Disabled Upon Arrival* explores, 1890–1925, the only checkpoint Dolmage could have been referencing in El Paso was the Santa Fe International Bridge (Dolmage 11; Romo 225). The Santa Fe Bridge—which friends, colleagues, and I would cross daily nearly a century later—fulfilled many of the same functions as Ellis Island as a site of movement, intake, inoculation, and differentiation. In contrast to the binary immigration (either be admitted or be sent back) of sea-borne immigrants hosted by Ellis Island, the checkpoint at the Santa Fe Bridge served the additional function of routinizing the relationships of laboring Mexicans as they crossed back and forth from Juárez, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas. To serve this function, the checkpoint was host to an enormous "delousing plant" that funneled Mexican crossers, particularly those working in "menial" occupations, through an enormous multi-stage bath and laundry facility where they were stripped, inspected, and subjected to kerosene showers while their clothes were "sterilized." It was at this plant, among others, that the use of Zyklon B was pioneered as a sterilizing agent, which, alongside its overall design, was circulated through German pesticide journals as a possible technique for delousing Polish migrant laborers—and was ultimately adopted and used in the gas showers of the Shoah (Romo 240–1). While delousing was part of immigration at Ellis Island, in El Paso, it became a more quotidian ritual of submission and humiliation. The Santa Fe checkpoint was also an important site for the application of intelligence testing. The text of a standardized intelligence test was administered to immigrants from the interior of Mexico who were crossing at the checkpoint in order to generate arguments for increased immigration quotas by demonstrating a supposed racial tendency of "feeblemindedness." These tests "showed" that "the average I.Q. of the Mexican race was 78.1%," which historian David Romo cross-references with intelligence testing at Ellis Island that had the similar effect of placing 83% of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in categories of "imbecile and [feeble-minded]" (243).

The similarities between the Santa Fe Bridge and Ellis Island checkpoints, alongside the other examples that Dolmage cross-references across the Southwest, show that the checkpoint served as a stable technical form in the early twentieth-century US. We can generalize this to our contemporary situation. In their practices of queuing, inspection, and marking, border checkpoints articulate a national community and its Others. While the tools enrolled to assemble the literacy technology of the checkpoint have shifted—photography has evolved to include facial identification and biometrics—this pattern has remained strong. This allows the checkpoint to serve as a metonymic device that contains and produces the border and the nation(s) around it—producing, as Victor Villanueva put it, "a fiction within the fiction of a nation" (34), in this case through its routines of surveillance, biopolitical marking, and ritualized submission. While this form remains a key technology of articulation of US sovereignty and national identity, much has changed in the intervening century. One key change is our entry into a networked age, which Vieira explores, following anthropologist Gilberto Rosas, as the documentary society and its thickening borderlands in her text *American by Paper*, where she works closely with largely Azorean and Brazilian immigrants in South Mills

by crafting a sociomaterial theory of literacy at the intersection of New Literacy and "strong text" theories of literacy (Vieira, *American* 6, 11).

The Checkpoint and Its Global Consequences

The previous section grounded the checkpoint as a technical form in US history with the assistance of Dolmage and Romo. This section charts how the checkpoint unfolds globally by examining how the technology produces routine forms of violence, and how that violence informs a global geography of migrant death that extends from the US–Mexico border into Latin America, Europe, Iraq, and Palestine. It is in this capacity that the checkpoint as a literacy technology articulates national identities in terms of the threat it writes into the state.

Vieira makes the explicit point that the checkpoint is no longer the singular apparatus for the fractal documentation of human, particularly immigrant, life under a mass-bureaucracy: "Document checkpoints do not exist only on the physical border marked on a map. They pervade migrants' experiences in the United States, where documents are demanded in workplaces, in schools, on the road" (*American* 6). Against this context, Vieira examines the literacy practices—defined socio-materially as "a mobile complex of practices and products, instilled with meaning both by institutions and by the people under their thrall" (*American* 142)—of migrants in South Mills, North Carolina. While Vieira is concerned primarily with the complex and lived experiences of her participants and the ways in which they circumvent and make a life under these complex networks of bureaucratic control, here I am concerned with her analysis of the apparatus of "papers" from an institutional point of view. While the checkpoint may not be *central*, it remains, as a form, *essential*. That it proliferates across international contexts, and is a major site for knowledge production and border enforcement training, should lead us to recognize, not downplay, its core significance. For migrants, "everything you want to do depends on a document you don't have" (Vieira, *American* 13). This complex network of visas, passports, and authorizations constructs the migrant so that they can say, "I belong . . . I can pass" (Vieira, *American* 59), or occupy the opposite of that condition: a near total alienation from space, a subject hyper-vulnerable to violence. This "literacy as a material product or technology (like papers) exchanged in bureaucratic and interpersonal interactions" (Vieira, *American* 4) reaches in and textualizes bodies as contraband or illicit. That is, it produces a way of inscribing the bodies under its gaze in a way that exists independently from the content of the living person. Vieira references this through John Torpey as the construction of "file selves" (*American* 7), while Ralph Cintron identifies this textualization as reducing "to manageable proportions the excess of what it means to be an individual" (56–7). Cintron identifies profound civilizational stakes in this process, asking: "In protecting the institution in the name of 'all' [the national community], what actions become justified?" (57). For Vieira, undocumented people are those "not *written into* but *written out of* the state" (*American* 81). Given the array of punitive measures in place to capture and construct the undocumented in order to protect the sacral status of the documented, we can see that undocumented people are not "written

out" of the state, but written *into* it as threats. We can see this by turning once again to the technical form of the checkpoint and its site as a globalized mechanism for border security.

The checkpoint, as a form, textualizes the bodies under its gaze as biopolitical threats as enemies-in-waiting. The technical knowledge around checkpoint construction has become a major export of US and Global North imperial maintenance in its current form. As the journalist Todd Miller attests in *Empire of Borders*, it is through the exportation of checkpoint techniques and the border forces trained on US models that we can see that the US–Mexico, Mexico–Guatemala, and Guatemala–Honduras borders are now an internationalized complex. As Miller expresses, "thinking of the U.S. southern border as simply its divide with Mexico drastically reduce[s] its immense geographic scope and mask[s] its true nature as an instrument for domination" (*Empire of Borders* 35). That the new agencies which spring up as part of these mandates often take their names from Mayan culture and language—the Tecun Uman and Xinca forces, for example—both signals their participation in the nation-building discourses of Indigenismo in those countries, and takes on a particular irony, as displaced Mayan peoples are those whom they most often target (Miller, *Empire of Borders* 6). This naming scheme, understanding Mexico as also a settler colonial state, reveals a fundamental continuum—a way in which settler colonial states demonstrate their affinities through the medium of checkpoint technology. This is a point where abolitionist and decolonial scholarship is especially useful in producing critical insight. Where Miller speaks of the US–Guatemala border, historian Alexander Aviña speaks of the Mexico–Palestine border "built on top of ongoing US settler colonial projects that continue to strip indigenous communities of their land and sovereignty and maintained with technology violently developed in Gaza and the West Bank" (Aviña). The checkpoint and wall-advising specialties of Israeli technicians were so important to the Cold War border projects of Latin (particularly Central) America, that

> [i]n the midst of a "quiet genocide" committed against Mayan communities during the early 1980s—scorched earth military campaigns designed with the assistance of Israeli military advisers—rightwing Guatemalans discussed the "Palestinianization" of the country's indigenous peoples, who comprised more than half of the country's population. Israeli advisers [guiding the implementation of internal checkpoints] told Guatemalan military officers to "treat the Indians like the Palestinians—don't trust any of them." (Aviña)

The checkpoint inscribes roles: the agent, the questioner, the questioned, and the routines and machinery of inspection, which produce the subjects at its heart as untrustworthy, as existing at all times under a heuristic of suspicion. This martialing of suspicion and scrutiny shows how its literacy is built to foreclose abolitionist possibilities, and why abolitionist scholarship must target it squarely. Border checkpoints are important focal points that render the documentary border territorially legible, and where the dynamics of having or not having papers become heightened and sometimes lethally significant. Vieira's project is to examine the distributed reality of papers and the "documentary border" in a way that moves concurrently, but surpasses

the checkpoint as a physical and geographic form (*American* 6). She does not do so to their exclusion—rather, to expand our understanding of the conditions of being bordered—but the checkpoint's particular place in this contemporary situation must still be articulated. The necessity for this articulation is corroborated by scholars such as Tamara Vukov and Mimi Sheller who show that borders, as a virtual and actual space in line with Vieira's documentary border, have become fractalized and now permeate our entire society through the technologies of bioinformatics and remote surveillance which have now superseded the role of emerging photography identified by Dolmage (Vukov and Sheller 226). This distributed condition does not mean that checkpoints have lost their significance, as Vieira argues. As Vukov and Sheller show in their cross-referencing of border and airport checkpoints as sites of disciplining self-disclosure and bio-political management, checkpoints have not been superseded by the documentary border, but intensified by it, just as they intensify it in return (229). Checkpoints are generators of the "dynamic border governance" which Ngo and Hung call "checkpoint politics" (179). In the context of the thickening border, the checkpoint apparatus in its sociomaterial existence has a profound shaping role on the articulation of sovereignty and belonging wherever it is employed—but in the US, Europe, "Israel," and their allies, it is a way of marking and integrating threat as an abstract category core to the identity of those states.

The checkpoint is a literacy technology that reads and writes the nature of what counts as a threat and its countermeasures, which allows us to expand Vieira's understanding of undocumentedness. Dolmage was right in more than one way to identify Ellis Island as being kin with the Fordist production line (14). The checkpoint is still a mass-assembly line. What makes this a literacy technology is that it is an enormous documentary apparatus where people are literally stamped with barcodes dictating the nature and legitimacy of their movement in a machine that is constantly "assigning spatial and social identifiers, signals and codes" (Martén and Boano 528). While the condition of lacking papers and the resulting violence from this state can happen outside of the institutions of checkpoints and embassies at "everyday sites of bureaucratic interactions where papers are demanded" (Vieira, *American* 7), checkpoints produce these conditions and relations at scale. Eugenics, the ordering discourse of immigration in the early twentieth century, has been replaced by the discourse of national security.

Immigrants are now all potential threats, not to the genetic wellbeing of the nation, but to the sanctity of its property and "way of life." The checkpoint, in the current immigration apparatus, is the primary "line of defense" here. In the highlights of a study built to enhance Customs and Border Protection's data collection and streamline its techniques, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) hails the checkpoint as a major assist to their ability to "seize illegal drugs, apprehend illegal aliens, and screen potential terrorists" (1). In a large document that calls for increased inspection technology, canine units, and improved design decisions, the US GAO particularly notes local community concerns to include the fear of negative influence on "violent crime, business, or property values" (59) caused "when illegal aliens and smugglers circumvent checkpoints to avoid apprehension" (1). Woods describes the data collection that happens here as a project of working against immigrant life by

collating vast amounts of data in a way that "produces negative implications for bodies that are already disproportionately and negatively impacted, particularly Black bodies and immigrant bodies" (115). It is through this coding of threat and the latent potential for violence—a potential supposedly increased by the mere *circumvention* of the checkpoint—that we can approach an answer to Cintron's question of what actions this literacy technology justifies.

The way the checkpoint is geared to read personal documents "makes" a certainty out of the individual crossers, and those who do not fit into the schema become marked as existential threats. As we see in the GAO report, people moving through the checkpoint are interpellated into a circuit where they exist as potential terrorist-smuggler-illegal aliens. To contain this potential, the checkpoint apparatus formulates it thusly: *people held to be capable of anything are worth having anything done to them*. In the community of Customs and Border Protection officers in the United States, the checkpoint enables a particular kind of relational production expressed in their everyday vernacular: the officer and the "tonk." "Tonk" is an onomatopoeia for the sound of a flashlight slamming against a human head that has become a noun; "In Border Patrol stations the word 'tonk' is a commonplace description for the person whose papers are not in order. They are the people who most often receive the blow to the head" (Miller, *Border Patrol Nation* 107). As a signifier, this expresses the utter dehumanization of the undocumented person, but as a term, it represents the meeting of human complexity with what David Graeber identifies as the "bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema, and its monopoly of coercive force" (120–1), and undergoes the brute reduction to the zero-point of the police truncheon. This is the kind of quotidian violence that the checkpoint in part exists to write into the world, and so renders mundane the casual atmosphere of immiseration which exists at the border and spreads to the entire body politic.

The effect of the mundane reality of violence that this literacy technology produces is two-fold: First, Border Patrol agents can clothe themselves in an ethos of martial bravery and sacrifice for their efforts in guarding the national community from "potential terrorists." A vast number of texts are generated and circulated to this effect, lauding the bravery of these agents in rendering order to a dangerous world. A key example here comes from an official Border Patrol periodical, *Frontline*, whose issue, "A Powerful Presence," lauds the contribution of CBP agents in the training and outfitting of US and Iraqi soldiers "to create a national security structure that could handle the challenges the nation would face in the years to come" and "[help] the people of Iraq come into their own as a modern, functioning democracy" (Mayfield 9). This issue is replete with photographs that reinforce the danger and selflessness of these agents: hunkering for cover under suppressing fire (Mayfield 13), playing soccer in fatigues with an Iraqi child (Mayfield 14), and coordinating Iraqi guards at inspection points (Mayfield 8). We are given a thrilling narrative of international and inter-agency cooperation, as CBP worked with US Department of Transportation officials to train Iraqi officials in "nonintrusive" (Mayfield 9) inspection techniques, and in that capacity became "'the face of the embassy'" (Mayfield 10), according to CBP agent Mike Fowlkes. The text itself reinforces this ethos of sacrifice and charitable bravery, quoting

numerous agents in their reports of physical hazard but reassuring us that "the work was still rewarding in spite of the danger" (Mayfield 9).

This dynamic role and political function allows checkpoints to exert profound territorializing influence, not only on the people that circulate through them, but on their local geographies, in what political geographers Ricardo Martén and Camillo Boano term "checkpoint urbanism" (529). Examining the three major checkpoints between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez (including the Santa Fe International Bridge), they show that the checkpoints are not just "large scale binational infrastructure complexes that include passageways, control points, bridges, security stations and several other layers of securitisation and filtering" (Martén and Boano 528). Martén and Boano place this checkpoint complex within the political economy of manufacturing and narco-violence (really, low-intensity warfare) on the border, arguing that the checkpoint system as urbanism imbues a "magnetic significance" onto the surrounding cities, "due to the resulting transit dynamics and the surveillance deterrents at the core of their function. Furthermore, their dual nature—official and criminal—has branded the region as a criminal outpost, stigmatizing the people inhabiting it, and perpetuating the idea that Juárez is defined by its violent infrastructures" (526). This process operates as a mode of securitized threat production which, through its socio-material coding of geographic space, recasts Juárez "as the ultimate space for violence" with the consequence of "border restrictions over time and a wave of policies attempting to match the territorial coding of the violent hotspot" (Martén and Boano 542). This capacity for territorial coding makes the checkpoints rhetorical sites of production where the text of the national community as constantly besieged from an illusory Southern invasion becomes expressed in the narrative of "the Wall," or "a vague construct that embodies United States policy in its most naked simplicity: an impossible physical barrier meant to provide absolute order and protection from innumerable dangers" (Martén and Boano 543).

The second effect of this quotidian reality of violence is that, while the migra are able to clothe themselves in the martial ethos, the everyday function of violence and dehumanization which undocumented migrants are subject to at checkpoints suppresses the everyday text of their testimonies of mistreatment. As a literacy technology, the checkpoint selects what must and what must not be read. National security becomes such an accepted condition that everyday cruelties become accepted and expected, such that texts of Agency cruelty only circulate in the national and international media when they cross the line into spectacular acts of violence or mass detainment. Acts of violence on individuals must become truly unthinkable to justify reportage—for example, the 2013 death of 16-year-old Cruz Velazquez Acevedo. At the San Ysidro checkpoint between Tijuana and San Diego, where Acevedo attended high school, he was "'coerced and intimidated'" (Phillips) to sip a liquid that the agents suspected to be an illegal narcotic. Those agents chose not to administer a *three-minute* drug test until after he had begun to convulse and fatally overdose from what turned out to be liquid methamphetamine. Acevedo's death is not unique except in its shocking particularities, and while it resulted in a successful wrongful death and due process lawsuit, it is instructive that the agents' defense team filed for dismissal based on the argument that the case did not arise to a due process abuse because "'[n]onresident

aliens are entitled to constitutional protections only if they have substantial voluntary connections with the United States'" (qtd. in Phillips).[1] The coverage and circulation of texts around Acevedo's death joins other deaths at checkpoints which are too numerous to name. Reports of these deaths and other acts of quotidian violence only surface in reporting from a sea of anonymous abuse because of their remarkable cruelty. The texts of an everyday life—family photos, crush confessions over WhatsApp at midnight, Instagram stories of flautas at favorite spots—are actively suppressed through the violence justified by this security discourse at the contact zone of the checkpoints. Everyday texts such as these are forever altered by the enforced hybridity caused by the checkpoint. Just as Vee argued that conditions have altered such that the writing of code is deeply intersected with the writing of traditional text, now all writing, particularly for people who are deemed non-citizens, takes place with the checkpoint as its implicit reference point (60). All texts are forever altered by this hybridization, having to account for the checkpoint and its instantiated reality as much as for their own quotidian means and ends.

This distortion of everyday texts achieves an important move for the existential identity of the colonial states that employ the checkpoint, which inscribes deaths like Acevedo's within a particular economy of interpretation, shaping how we see, as any literacy does, questions of "historical trajectory, social shaping, affordances for communication, and connections to civic discourse" (Vee 43). These shaping capacities allow quotidian violence to pass by undetected, except as a way of valorizing the system. If Acevedo's death was laundered as an "unfortunate" excess of the checkpoint, the same goes for every death that happens as a circumvention of the checkpoint technology. As Walia puts it, "Like rape culture, victim-blaming responses to border deaths put responsibility on people for 'choosing' to make unsafe journeys. But restrictive policies [that] compel irregular migration and coercive state powers —not migrants—are responsible for these deaths" (137). For Walia, this concern is particularly legible in terms of the deaths caused by checkpoint circumvention. Recall that checkpoints gain in significance as the walls around them grow in impermeability, producing the "impossible physical barrier" (543) that Martén and Boano discuss. Through the sophistication of the checkpoint as technology, the border and its walls are strengthened, and where that sophistication makes subversion mandatory (as there is no other way through), the consequences of that subversion are rendered as a way of highlighting the state's weakness and justifying further strengthening of the checkpoint. It is in this way that we can view the ocean crossings of the Mediterranean; the deaths that result from the crossing of the Sonoran desert; or the thousands rushing in from Calais, France, at the English Channel Tunnel in 2015 and the deaths resulting from it; as products of the robust technological deployment of the checkpoint-wall formation (De León 3; Walia 135). More than merely products, these deaths are a way that checkpoints contribute to the spectacularization of death itself. As Walia points out via Sara Ahmed and other scholars, even the sympathetic display of victimage comes to reinforce the system itself (136). One small example of what Walia identifies here, following Ahmed's notes on how superficial empathy in the display of graphic suffering ultimately reinforces spectacle, is the recent construction of an effigy of ship-borne migrants—figures bound by lifejackets in a small boat, a mockery atop a tall pile of

wood and tinder—by Ulster loyalist forces in the North of Ireland ahead of "Eleventh Night," or "Bonfire Night," the night before July 12th, an historic celebration of settler-colonialist "victory" over the Irish natives in 1690 (Carroll; Morrissey and Brown). This kind of practice broadly shows how the deaths produced by the checkpoint and its walls become fodder for producing the identity of the settler colonial state, a move visible in the deaths in the Sonoran Desert, or anywhere that terrain is weaponized by checkpoints.

Accordingly, even sympathetic portrayals of migrants and their suffering become a spectacle rife for mockery, and a manner of *writing in* a justification for the bordering that orders the kinds of deaths checkpoints produce. The theater of the spectacularized deaths in the Sonoran desert; on the Mediterranean Sea; and in the quiet homes, alleyways, and streets where overdoses occur; produces a theatrical display which not only legitimizes the checkpoint, but enforces what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang term a fundamental "move to innocence" in settler-colonial rhetoric: "In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there" (6). The rendering of migrant deaths as spectacle that Walia identifies becomes a way in which the checkpoint and the wall around it is justified as a bastion of defense against the Other, and so reinforces, from "Israel" to Guatemala to the North of Ireland to the US, a variety of settler nativism which not only eliminates or erases the Indigenous, but writes them into those states as threats that the settler "native" must oppose in order for that state to achieve its own corrupted ideals of freedom.

So here we are: the checkpoints—their routine thievery of time and dignity; and their operations, which are as often pointless as they are cruel—contributing to an ever-lowering fall of expectations in a social environment that descends evermore into naked brutality. That is the object and purpose of this literacy technology. Its brute and uncaring stupidity is as much a pedagogical mechanism as its exacting competencies. What does responding to this pedagogy mean for our field? It is here I shall linger before I depart.

Checkpoint Composition

I have tried to demonstrate over the course of these pages how checkpoints act as a literacy technology in all of the intricacies that the term conveys. As I turn to what this means for the field in terms of concrete pedagogical recommendations and what we must make of this, I confront the fact that *I don't know*. I do not know what composition studies must do, or how it will work in our pedagogies. I only know we must reckon with it as it informs the very ground we stand on. In this way, my contribution resonates with Nattaporn Luangpipat's study in *Literacy in Composition Studies* that centers language ideology and the suppression of Chinese literacy in Thailand; like her, I aim to "[deepen] our understanding" and "[broaden our] perspective" (41) of a key area of everyday suppression. And suppression is very much at issue here.

To provide basic examples of recent note, and how they might translate to the interpersonal relationships of composition work, in June of 2025, a Norwegian tourist

was reportedly denied entry to the United States because of a J. D. Vance meme found on his phone. The administration, for its part, denied the meme was the prime cause of his exclusion and instead said it was about his admission of past drug use (Salam). In March of 2025, the French Minister of Research, Philippe Baptiste, reported that a French scientist was barred from the country because of his critical discourse about the current US administration, which the US government deemed "'hateful and conspiratorial messages'" (Mackey). A German-American green card holder was tortured and detained in March of 2025 and held in an ICE facility for two months over what the government alleged was a drug misdemeanor from years prior (Skipworth). Two things to note: 1) All of these news items are configured as sensational because they involve white Europeans—we do not know how much similar abuse has taken place under the guise of normalcy involving anyone else—and, 2) all of these incidents happened at airport checkpoints, because of their technical reach and their enjoining literacies.

The usage of memes, texts, and other data carried on the phone to incriminate and incarcerate means that the mere things I am writing here could—were I a visa holder and not a citizen, or even then, were I not white—serve as enough justification under the right eyes to justify my refusal at the country's border, or worse. Just as sinister is the unbidden entry of a third party, waiting always at the checkpoints, forcing their way into our communications. I have F-1 visa-holding friends and colleagues with whom I have sometimes censored myself in conversation in writing because horror stories like the aforementioned note that the agents who intercepted those people at the checkpoints did not discriminate between whether they were senders or receivers of the "offending" content. All acts of communication with my friends and colleagues, no matter how caught up in "after hours" informality, must account for the fact that, unless you change your settings, WhatsApp will automatically deposit an image sent to you into your phone's gallery of images. In the mere act of communicating with a friend or a coworker, I could sign their warrant. This freighting on of hazard to everyday communication is made all the worse by a point driven home in all of the rights trainings I asked my students to attend when I taught at the University of Texas at El Paso: the CBP and ICE can search your phone freely, particularly if you use face recognition or thumbprint unlocking, and use whatever they find there ("Border Search"). If you have so much as an ironic meme about weed smoking on your phone, they can put the boot to you, or worse.

All this to say, the checkpoint as literacy technology *defines the edges of what is sayable, and by whom*. This definitional capacity affects the very grounds of what composition can accomplish. Standing here in 2026, we should not forget the most obvious example of the refusal of the checkpoint, the wall, and their attendant logics of steady biopolitical management: Every day that a Palestinian exists is a refusal of the checkpoints and walls that hem them in; every day is a refusal of "Israel's" will to exterminate them. As I earlier signaled, *people held to be capable of anything are worth having anything done to them.* In contradistinction to this logic of genocide and submission made routine through checkpoint and wall formations, we should speak up. Yet, we know that any discussion of this matter is met with the "Palestine exception," and the totalizing proscription on speech, writing, and scholarship which

targets the illegitimate state that holds murder and displacement close to its heart (Shwaikh and Gould 753). The "Palestine exception" demonstrates the chokehold that the checkpoint has on the possibilities of our writing and our pedagogies. At the same time, the example set by Palestinians and other Indigenous peoples as they struggle for their land and their very lives, guides us in our responsibility as compositionists. In this way, Palestine offers us the best example of an abolitionist and decolonial exigency, as "'none of us are free until Palestine is free'" (Aviña).

To whatever extent we can approach the checkpoint in our classroom work, we must account not just for the consequences of this literacy technology, but also for the crucial way in which it has always enjoined resistance. Any geographic border remains an abstraction, a line on a map as easily walked across as dismissed, until it is given bold definition by the checkpoints that anchor it, and the walls that gird and emphasize them as chokepoints. While the dictates of the checkpoint take on the force of gospel, a social ontology that is presented as an inarguable logic of the nation-state, as Iris Ruiz and Damián Baca attest, it is worth talking also of resistance, and what it means to resist this kind of technology: "Today, colonial legacies continue to essentialize, demonize, criminalize, detain, deport, imprison . . . but we are speaking back" (228). These apparatuses, as naturalized as they have become in the mainstream consciousness, have never been met without contest, either in day-to-day response or in outbursts of mass resistance. The Santa Fe Bridge hosted one such outburst, the 1917 El Paso Bath Riots, where Carmelita Torres refused to submit to the delousing process at the checkpoint, and was joined by 30 other women, which then further snowballed into several thousand protestors who "hurled bottles, rocks and insults" (Romo 225) at the customs agents and police who tried to disperse them. Rock throwing at agents still occurs, often with fatal stakes, as in the fatal shooting of 16-year-old Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez and the near-fatal shooting of 29-year-old Miguel Angel Castellanos Martinez (Gaubeca; Riggins and Davis). Edward Said once figured Palestinian stone-throwers on the Palestinian border against its colonizing entity, among other checkpoints, as a powerful symbol of unarmed crowd resistance to militarized power (326). We should extend the same understanding to people like Torres, Martinez, and Rodriguez.

In this environment, as compositionists and abolitionists, we should hold ourselves in "thick solidarity"—"that is, a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences" (Liu and Shange 190). Accordingly, what composition can do—for instructors, and not just those on F-1 visas who frequently contend with the suspicion of airport checkpoints; and for students who cross the border daily at every checkpoint near universities in Texas, Arizona, and California, whose fatigue and trauma is so sublimated as to be taken as "normal"—is to ask questions and promote writing that centrally targets questions like: how does this technology inscribe and decode border death as a matter of its literacy? These checkpoints, in all their apparatuses, are forms of what Simone Browne refers to as racializing surveillance: "when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race, and where the outcome of this is often discriminatory and violent treatment" (8). As compositionists, we can work alongside our students to

challenge borders and help them articulate and push back on how the basic logic of the checkpoint informs their lives.

In its structure, the checkpoint contains the circular logic of an addiction. Put simply by Miller: "When security 'worked,' you sought more. When it didn't 'work,' you needed more" (*Empire of Borders* 23). Just as Lucken IV wrote that traditional models of literacy are, in fact, dependent on "non-standard or minoritized Others as [their] condition of possibility" (55), the checkpoint technology depends on its own failures to gain its significance. If this is a kind of distributed social addiction, then we in the imperial core have the chance to intervene, and this remains an important direction for the advancing of the rhetorical, abolitionist, and compositionist scholarship of checkpoints and of border-making generally. More important than expanding our field's understanding of these issues, this intervention aids in the general project of de-naturalizing these apparatuses and their place in immiserating the numberless masses of refugees and immigrants who are daily relegated to detainment and abuse, or left to anonymous fates in the remote deserts of the Sonora highlands.

What are we to do? I cannot answer this question. I only forward another, posed by Aviña: "A rather stark, uncomplicated choice thus emerges: do we side with the wall builders and their apartheid, counterinsurgent technology that kills refugees in places like the Sonoran Desert or the Mediterranean Sea? Or those who yearn to storm and smash walls with their dreams of a more just, free future for all?"

Notes

[1] It is worth noting that this exact kind of due process lawsuit is no longer legally available as an accountability mechanism to the victims of CBP and their survivors, owing to the 2022 US Supreme Court decision *Egbert v. Boule*.

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Magnifying Dissent: "Illuminating" the Capital Appeals Process through Abolitionist Literacy Narrative

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KEYWORDS

Death row; Dissent; Capital appeals process; Abolitionist narratives; Grammars of law; Illumination

ABSTRACT

In 1994, Joesph Patri Brown was convicted of capital murder in Mississippi, and he has been fighting that conviction from death row ever since. In this article, Brown and co-author Alison Turner frame his experiences of learning and marking the capital appeals process as an abolitionist literacy narrative. They position the capital appeals process as an esoteric genre that consists of both text—volumes and volumes of documents written in legalese—but also, like any genre, context. Joesph shares pieces of his narrative that include his early "illiteracy" in what happens to people on death row; his endurance of that process; his learning of "legalese"; and methods for staying involved in his own case. Alison connects each of these sections to abolitionist writing studies discourse, engaging most closely with scholars Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein, who propose that abolitionist work "reduce[s] the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates" (n.p.). The article contributes not only a focus on the capital appeals process within the discourse of prison writing and what Joe Lockard calls "death row narratives" (60) but also a specific tool for reading the capital appeals process—"magnifying dissent." Brown and Turner show how "magnifying dissent" is a specific practice of counterstory (Martinez) for abolitionist "illuminating."

Introduction: "Now One of Many"

When I made it to Parchman in March 1994, they had taken my free-world clothes and gave me a one-piece red jumpsuit. I was able to keep my socks and shoes. That was everything I owned and that's all I had when they placed me in a front cell. I thought there was no one else on death row because they put me on the tier with the state inmates, which could only mean the other death row people were all executed. I only had 30 days before my execution, so I thought everyone else must have had only 30 days, too, which meant they were all dead.

That following week, a guard making his rounds for the morning shift change stopped and asked, "You want day room call?" and I said, "Yes." He placed handcuffs on my wrists and the guard in the watchtower pushed a button and the door opened. I stepped out, not sure which way to go. "Follow me," said the guard. Bars, gray floors, and yellow walls were all I was seeing, but as I turned to go up the second flight of stairs, I heard voices. After stepping off the last step onto the tier, a door was a foot to my left. I walked through it and saw all these men in red jumpsuits, and you can't begin to imagine the relief. It wasn't just four or three of them, either. There were about 14 men inside this first room. Men were just walking around; some playing card games, dominoes; Black guys and White guys alike; all in red, just like me. I was left standing. I was dumbstruck that there were that many guys on death row.

Eventually, I ventured out and watched four guys playing spades. I asked them how long I get to stay on rec call, and someone said "one hour." It was my day to be a silly motherfucker, I guess, because then I said, "How come y'all ain't dead?" That was literally dumb, and I began to stumble over my words and tell them that they were going to kill me next month, April, on the 16th. Dudes just started laughing. They called three others over to where we stood and told them what I'd said. I guess this was some running joke they were playing on me. Finally, one of them told me, "Ain't nobody gonna kill ya; they pull that shit on everybody they sentence to death." These guys were three or two years into being on death row, and they didn't seem worried at all.

When the hour was up, I watched these men being led away dressed all in red, these final stop signs of life. The same guard that brought me to rec call came back, handcuffed me, and escorted me to my cell the same way he had brought me. But this time, I was seeing and hearing shit with new ears and eyes. All of these so-called dead men walking, laughing, playing. When the guard un-handcuffed me, I stepped back into the empty walls, cut-out window, concrete bed, stainless steel toilet, and sink. I didn't have any clue how to fight for my life or freedom. But now I knew that I may be alive long enough to fight. I was now one of many living in the land of the dead.[1]

*

The kind of misunderstanding that Joesph Patri Brown, co-author of this article, experienced more than 30 years ago could not be more extreme; how is it possible that no lawyer or judge made sure he understood the terms of his capital murder conviction? This is not a problem of any individual's ignorance, since "they pull that shit on everybody they sentence to death." In this article, Joesph and I present Joesph's

experiences of navigating the capital appeals process in Mississippi as an abolitionist literacy narrative that expands Joesph's early realizations that 1) he would not die in 30 days, but rather, he had a long appeals process ahead of him; and 2) he was not alone in this experience. We frame the capital conviction appeals process as an esoteric genre that consists of both text—volumes and volumes of documents written in "legalese"—but also, like any genre, context. Joesph now reads not only the "legalese" making up his appeals process, but also the physical and rhetorical attempts to limit his literacy.[2]

As Joesph continues to challenge his conviction, he writes regularly for several online platforms, publishing creative essays, poetry, fiction, and plays about his experiences and perspective. His continuous efforts to challenge his incarceration and write outwardly during the appeals process align with abolitionist thinkers such as Dylan Rodríguez, Jess A. Goldberg, and Patrisse Cullors, all of whom we reference in this article; primarily, however, this literacy narrative enacts the words of Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein, who propose that abolitionist work "reduce[s] the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates" (n.p.). For the rest of this article, we borrow the word "illuminate" with this abolitionist glow: Understanding the US carceral system requires collaboration with those who endure, and more specifically, illuminate how that system oppresses. Joesph's determination to become literate in what is among this country's most esoteric genres (capital appeals processes), to stay involved in his casework, and to write beyond the literal and proverbial "razor wire" (see below) is abolitionist in how it insists that it is not *he* who is the crisis, but the system.

After a review of literature that situates this literacy narrative in the overlapping concerns of the US carceral system, abolition, and literacy studies, we present three themes from Joesph's experiences of navigating more than three decades on death row. These themes are not a beginning, middle, and end of a narrative that starts with illiteracy and ends in literacy; rather, the themes overlap continuously in an increasing illumination that allows others to better understand the carceral system's "inability to solve the crises it creates" (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, n.p.). Each section begins with Joesph's writing and is followed by Alison bridging this writing into abolitionist literacy studies discourse.

In Part 1, "Justice is Not an Event: Living the Appeals Process," Joesph summarizes the process of capital case litigation through his own experiences. Alison engages this summary with abolitionist theory from Goldberg's assertion that "justice is not an event" (7). In Part 2, "Abolitionist Praxis of Creativity: Insisting on Information," Joesph describes the strategies he's used to become literate in capital case litigation from within. Alison suggests that these methods are "tactical" in that they are "made by those without power" (qtd. in Plemons 40) and forms of "creative maladjustment" as a way to "[acknowledge] the necessity" (Middleton 8) of acting against a carceral system whose rules one is forced to oblige. These tactical maladjustments are a form of what Rodríguez calls "abolition as a praxis of creativity" (1580). In Part 3, "Magnifying Dissent," Joesph shares his attempts to access information about his own case—a process called "Discovery"—which has been many times denied. His continuous requests for Discovery resulted in dissent from two judges, which did not stop the majority's ruling; his case proceeded to the next court, and that dissent was lost.

Alison argues that dissent is a form of counterstorytelling, proposed by Aja Martinez as a method of incorporating critical race theory (CRT) into composition studies, and that magnifying dissent illuminates the "system's inability to solve the crises it creates" (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, n.p.). Magnifying dissent contributes a new method for abolitionist reading of the capital appeals process.

We conclude in the yard on death row in Mississippi, where each person with a death sentence reads the text and context of their own appeals process differently; while no one on the row wants to be executed, not everyone agrees on alternatives. These disagreements among people fighting capital convictions are creative rather than destructive, working toward ways of being that imagine beyond hierarchical decision making. Cullors writes that "[a]bolition invites people in. . . . Abolition does not choose sides" (1692). If Joesph's literacy narrative offers magnifying dissent as a reading tool, what other methods might be identified upon closer collaboration between writing studies scholars and others on death row? Each person's literacy narrative might end at a different method for reading and illuminate other paths forward; abolitionist thinking moves toward this polyvocality rather than away.

Death Row, Abolition, and Writing Studies: A Literature Review

As a Black man who grew up poor in Mississippi and was accused of murdering a White woman, Joesph writes from the locus of the entangled biases in the United States carceral system. Jeffery T. Ulmer, Gary Zajac, and Ashley E. Rodriguez suggest that when and where a crime takes place in this country affects a defendant's sentence because of "[c]ourt communities," the "prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys [who] interpret law in distinctive ways shaped by local contexts," making it possible to "develop their own informal norms, culture, politics, and constraints, producing variation in the application of criminal law and in the severity of legal sanctions" (322–3). Other researchers have articulated racial bias in every stage of the system, from criminal courts (Van Cleve) to the bond process (Davis).[3] These biases help to explain why sociologist Loïc Wacquant prefers the term "hyperincarceration" over the more popular term "mass incarceration" for how the US prison system disproportionately impacts some communities but not others.[4]

These biases persist throughout the extended litigation process for those defending themselves against the death penalty. Carol S. Steiker and Jordan M. Steiker compile multiple sources to demonstrate how racial discrimination "appears to permeate all phases of capital litigation" (307). Michael Cholbi and Alex Madva describe the death penalty as a system of "unjust recklessness that places the lives of black Americans [particularly] at risk" (519).[5] Members of Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty, a group of people living on death row in Alabama, along with co-author Katie Owens-Murphy, note that "[t]he Supreme Court has even acknowledged statistical evidence of racial bias in *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987) but shrugged its shoulders, arguing that '[racial] disparities in sentencing [are] an inevitable part of our justice system'" (127). This "shrug" is perhaps the most insidious action made possible by the status quo.

Despite these known biases, at the time of writing, 2,024 people sit on death row in the United States, and state governments have executed over 1,600 people since 1977—and counting ("Facts About").

Abolition of the death penalty in particular—as independent from abolition of the greater carceral system—is complicated. On one hand, the death penalty symbolizes the US carceral system's most abject manifestations. As Joe Lockard explains,

> [t]he death penalty functions as a crucial symbolic spearhead for political forces that seek to make incarceration more potent, intimidating, and fearsome. The symbolic potency of capital punishment that hangs over prison yards threatens all prisoners and constitutes an apex of lethal institutional power. (60–1)

Abolishing the death penalty, then, would seem to lower the system's "apex." Yet, others argue that focusing on death penalty abolition is misguided due to the relatively small numbers of people directly impacted as compared to the magnitude of the greater carceral system. Wacquant, for example, argues that abolishing the death penalty "would diminish neither the immense scope of the US carceral archipelago nor the tightening material and symbolic hold that the penal apparatus exerts on the societal body" (*Punishing the Poor* 37). Further, scholars studying the death penalty in the United States don't have much hope for grassroots abolition. Steiker and Steiker insist that abolition of the death penalty will "require intervention by the Supreme Court," an intervention that they describe as "unlikely" (310). Austin Sarat et al.'s study[6] of incidents of the death penalty making it onto ballots since the early twentieth century confirms that "the public seems to be more punitive than elites," so that death penalty abolition can only come from legislators and judges—in other words, it is a project of the "elites" (413).

It is in the encounter of these limits and concerns where abolitionists intervene. In *Abolition Time: Grammars of Law, Poetics of Justice*, Goldberg frames the US carceral system as part of the "grammars of law" that "seek to set everything and everyone in the world in place to maintain an overarching structure [that is] characterized by hierarchical domination" (3). The grammars of law make it possible for abolishing the death penalty to feel hopeless because it hasn't happened yet; the grammars of law position people with death sentences as among the most abandoned and inaccessible, at risk of physical death, civil death, and what Jill Stauffer calls "ethical loneliness" (1). Ethical loneliness is the "isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity . . . compounded by the experience of not being heard" (1). Though Goldberg does not engage with Stauffer's concept of ethical loneliness, Goldberg's framework invites the possibility that grammars of law work to maintain ethical loneliness. Hierarchical systems of power rely on a status quo that, Goldberg writes, "demarcate[s] possibility itself" (3). The kind of abandonment Stauffer explores is a demarcation attempting to separate those with capital convictions from pretty much everyone else.

If abolishing the death penalty is a logistical issue for the elites to resolve, then it becomes all the more important for those who are not elite to be heard. Joesph contributes to a corpus of writing that Lockard calls "death row narratives," a genre

that is "distinguishable . . . in much the same manner as antislavery literature [that] coalesced before the US civil war" and "plays a crucial political role as witness literature that reveals state violence, its organization, and propagation of public fear" (60). Yet while Joesph is not alone in writing from death row, the majority of people living on death row are not reaching wide audiences.[7] The material, systemic, and rhetorical obstructions to writers behind the razor wire, i.e., in jails and prisons, have been well explored in literacy studies (see Hinshaw; Jacobi; and Kerr). To write through, over, or around these razor wires, incarcerated writers employ rhetorical sovereignty in a culture of rhetorical imperialism (Lyons); write through, despite, or against White supremacist language (Inoue); tell counterstories that fragment the smooth assumptions of stock stories (Martinez); use both Michel de Certeau's "tactics" as applied to literacies inside prisons (Plemons) and "creative maladjustment" (Middleton 8)—a concept emerging from a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., brought into educational structures by Herbert Kohl, and applied to prison literacies by Logan Middleton—to create from within the system; and cross the limits that the grammars of law use to contain its hierarchies (Goldberg).[8]

In Goldberg's framework, the limits set by the grammars of law are transgressed through a "poetics of justice," or "practices of language, writing, and reading that disrupt, refuse, eschew, or deconstruct the order imposed by law's grammar" (3). Joesph's literacy narrative is a poetics of justice, both via his writing and his navigation of physical and rhetorical barriers to that writing, but his literacy narrative also more expansively illuminates the "cris[i]s" of the death sentence as something that is not about individuals but the system (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, n.p.). This illumination is a praxis of creativity; in the words of Rodríguez, abolition is "not merely a practice of negation—a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations—but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice" (1576). In the literacy narrative presented in this article, becoming literate in the capital appeals process becomes abolitionist when it "illuminates" what the system intends to keep in the dark.

Part 1. Justice Is Not an Event: Living the Appeals Process

In August 1992, I was walking along St. Catherine Street in Natchez, Mississippi, with my then live-in girlfriend. A Natchez police cruiser slowed down and stopped. I was in possession of over an ounce of crack cocaine, so I ran from him. My girlfriend also ran, and eventually we were both found and arrested. I was handcuffed, placed in the squad car, and taken to the Felony Crime Unit. I was placed in an interrogation room where detectives read me my Miranda Rights. I said nothing and signed the form.

I was taken to the Sheriff's Department, where they fingerprinted me and took all of my possessions, jewelry, and money. They questioned me about my whereabouts over the last few days. I asked repeatedly what this was about and stated several times that I did not know anything about anything. It had been a long day and I was worn down, tired physically and mentally. It was like I was sleepwalking by the time they formally arrested me, but I knew I had not robbed or killed anyone like they were

accusing me of doing. I made the one phone call they allowed me, calling my moms to tell her where I was.

In the days following my arrest, I was taken to the municipal court for the initial appearance before a judge, who appointed me an attorney and formally read off my charges. I searched my mind to find how they could think I'd robbed anyone much less killed someone inside some store. I had been inside the store they were talking about countless times as a child, going to and from church and my grandparents' and great grandparents' home. It felt almost like a family store, because we would stop there every time we went past it. This was surreal, you understand, as I sat there listening.

A few weeks after my initial court appearance, I was taken back into the Municipal Court before a different judge for the preliminary hearing. Somehow, this case made it to a grand jury. Approximately ten months passed as I waited in the county jail, and then the grand jury found that there was sufficient evidence to charge me with armed robbery. Then, in June of 1993, the charges against me were upgraded to capital murder. After the two required phases of a capital murder trial (the first for a jury to determine if I did what I was charged with and the second to decide the penalty), I had rotted in jail for 20 months.[9]

The capital murder trial lasted four days, and in March of 1994, I was convicted and sentenced to death. I was sent to Mississippi's death row at Parchman on the fifth day. I was under the impression that I had only 30 days to live before being murdered by the State of Mississippi. I was not aware that there was an appellant process, an automatic mechanism in all capital cases intended to ensure that there are no legal errors that could lead to an unjust execution. Over the last 33-plus years, the appellant process for me has included the following stages: 1) making a direct appeal to the Mississippi State Supreme court (four years to complete); 2) filing a State Post-Conviction Petition for Relief (12 years to complete); and 3) filing a Federal Writ of Habeas Corpus Petition to the Southern District Court of Mississippi (14 years and counting). What I know about the remaining two appeal stages (the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit and the US Supreme Court) is that anyone who reaches them is just as good as dead. Our chances for relief are slim-to-none with these courts, and those are betting odds I'm not willing to risk.

I know a bit more about what happens after all of these courts have rejected us, since I've seen it happen to 26 men and have experienced part of it myself (that's another story).[10] The Mississippi State Attorney General will file a request with the Mississippi State Supreme Court to set a date. The Mississippi State Supreme Court will set a date and issue a death warrant to the Department of Corrections (DOC). The superintendent will come to the housing unit of the condemned person and stand before them to read out the death warrant advising them of the nature, date, and time they are to be murdered. Mississippi does its killing on Wednesdays at 6 pm.

In the hours leading up to the execution, the condemned person will be allowed final visits with family, friends, and spiritual advisors. The condemned person is offered a final meal, and, when the appointed hour approaches, escorted into the execution chamber and secured to a gurney where intravenous lines are inserted into their arms by an execution team. I'm not sure it's possible for anyone to imagine what it's like to feel utterly helpless in these Final Days. Final Hours. Final Minutes. Final Seconds.

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Joesph's path through his appeals process is perhaps traceable as a reduced version in Figure 1, a flowchart in a packet of information for victims and their families in capital cases (to our knowledge, no such packet of information is offered to the families of those who are convicted in capital cases). Flowcharts are designed to visually simplify a process, and this chart is no exception. In the graphic below, we annotate this flowchart with Joesph's more nuanced explanations of his time in each court. Notably, the chart offers no time frame for each stage, as it will be different for each person. This is one of the system's double standards: while a defendant is given deadlines to file an appeal, the court's response is under no such time constraint.

1) Trial. Four days.

2) Direct appeal to the Mississippi State Supreme court, 1994–1998: three years and four months of back and forth filing between state prosecutors and me; six months of waiting for the Court's ruling.

3) Application for Post Conviction Relief, 1999–2012: three years of filing between state prosecutors and me; seven months of waiting for the court ruling to remand on a mitigated psychological claim; three years waiting for a hearing on that claim back in circuit court; eight years and eight months of waiting for a court ruling on that claim.

4) Petition for Federal Habeas Corpus, 2012–the present. One year and six months of back and forth filing between state prosecutors and me; six months waiting on a court ruling to stay and abate the habeas petition so that I could return to state court to file a successive state court post-conviction petition; four years between state prosecutors and me to file this petition; two years waiting for a ruling on that successive post-conviction petition; then, returning to district court, four years of filing between state prosecutors and me on the amended petition for habeas corpus; two years of waiting for a ruling, and counting.

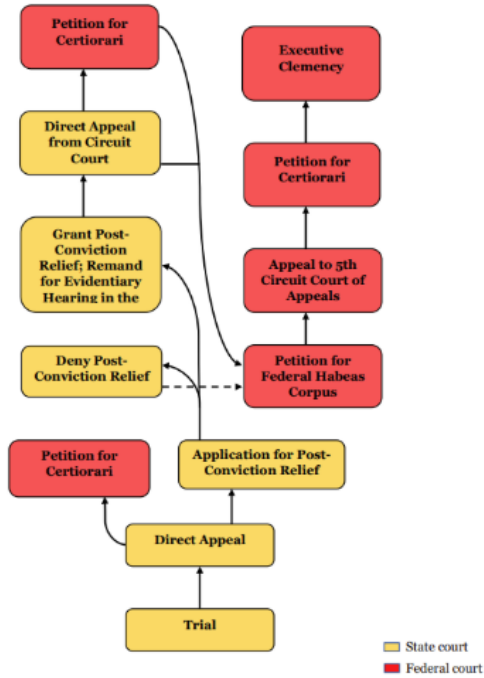


FIGURE 1. Flowchart showing possible steps of a capital appeals process in Mississippi (from the Office of Attorney General Lynn Fitch).

The difference between the simplified flowchart and the annotations of a person enduring those stages serves as a metaphorical visual for the capital appeals process at large: so procedural and (relatively) tidy on paper, but complex, messy, and difficult to follow on the ground. What is particularly striking in Joesph's annotations is the role of time behind these simplifications.[11] One way of understanding grammars of law, Goldberg argues, is that it is an "[imposing] periodization" or an "ordering of time" (2). It is this imposition of time that makes it possible for the grammars of law to frame justice as an "event" with a beginning, middle, and end. Once a sentence is mandated, the grammars of law suggest, justice will proceed through the chart of its stages. However, Goldberg asserts, and Joesph's annotations confirm, that "justice is not an event" (7). Presupposing that a conviction, sentence, ruling, or execution finishes a sense of injustice is an epistemological limit that typically satisfies neither a victim nor their loved ones.[12] It is clear from Joesph's narrative in this section that capital case sentencing is not an "event"—rather, being sentenced to death is the beginning of a long process that travels in and out of county, state, and federal courts, and corresponding legal representation.

Anyone who is not a lawyer or not directly impacted by this system is unlikely to study the capital appeals process—and studying it does not necessarily mean understanding it. This puts Joesph and so many others in a particularly challenging position when trying to explain their situation to loved ones or supporters. Highlighting the lived experience of these stages "illuminates" the temporal dominance in this system, returning to Berger, Kaba, and Stein's call for abolitionist work that "reduce[s] the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates" (n.p.). Literacy in this process could be a passive one; these stages will happen, through some direction of the flowchart or another, without interaction from the person whose life they most directly impact (see the next section for some examples of this from Joesph). Yet staying involved and active in one's own case —and teaching it to the illiterate, in this case, those who are unfamiliar with the above flowchart, its idiosyncrasies, and what it takes to move from one stage to the next—opens up the possibility of abolitionist illumination. The patience required to educate those who can live their entire lives without considering this process is an abolitionist praxis of illumination.

Part 2. Abolitionist "Praxis of Creativity": Insisting on Information

Maybe you have heard that "the law is fluid." What that means is that American laws are continually in motion and changing each day. To keep up, it is essential that I have access to a legal library where I can study and do research to be current in the development of my appeals process. In 1996, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) was enacted during the Clinton administration. The State of Mississippi (and other execution states) were effectively given permission to downsize and eliminate access to prison legal libraries, preventing us from physically going inside the library and studying law books that were instrumental to us (me) in challenging state prosecutors' legal motions. We were given access only to legal material we could cite exactly by name and case number. I was expected to find the necessary cases from within my caged cell in solitary confinement 23 out of 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without internet access, with only six inches of permitted legal documents, and no idea about the sequence of letters and numbers needed for relevant cases. If I was unable to provide this exact information, the people operating the library were not obligated to help me. They could simply ignore my request form.

Things have changed some over the past two years, as the Mississippi Department of Corrections has authorized the use of tablets.[13] For a while there, we could access legal information on current rulings from every court in every state in the country—a very useful tool. However, tablets are not connected to the internet, and we are only allowed one free hour a day. So, say there were 400 ruling opinions in the year 2024, and I didn't know if the case I wanted was #5 or #15 or #300. I would have to start with the very first case and continue scrolling from #1 to #300. If I didn't find it, then I kept scrolling until I reached #400. If, between my scrolling, someone used the microwave or the power went out, then I'd lose the connection and have to start the process all over again. During all this time, 20 minutes might pass. I'd still need to read and study and take notes on this case. That one hour would go by fast. As of only a few weeks ago,

we don't have access to that app anymore anyway: first, federal cases were blocked from opening, then, a few weeks later and after informing DOC officials that we had partial access, access to the entire app was blocked. So, it's back to square one.

This is a part of why many people in my situation don't even take pen and paper to their lawyer visits; they don't bother taking notes. The vast majority accept that our attorneys, who have years upon years of education and experience, are better suited to chart the course. There was a man executed about a decade ago who didn't know the race of his lawyer until the day of his execution. However, there are a few death row prisoners, of which I am one, who prefer, and oftentimes demand, that our attorneys try different approaches. In 2014, having been on death row for 20 years, I had the mental awakening that I was going to be active and involved with the full workings of my case's appeals processes. I decided to have a sit-down, no-sugarcoating discussion with my then-attorneys. I told them that they should use their learning to figure out which procedural rules and case laws were needed to match the arguments I wanted to make. For example, my case includes a forged letter that played a major role in my conviction; prosecutors distracted the case from the fact that the letter was forged, focusing instead on the chain of people through which the letter became available to prosecutors. I insisted to my lawyer at the time that we include this letter in my petition filing; he resisted because the lower court had ruled it as a chain of custody issue. After I insisted, and it was noted into record, the forged letter became one of the major claims in my successive petition filing.

We don't know what we don't know, and if we don't try something new, then we don't know what will work in our favor when it comes to a capital case. We are the constant inside of these appeal processes, while attorneys come and go. So, if we are not taking control of the narrative being told in our filings, then we leave our fate entirely in the hands of people who don't know us. If we want anything to change, we need to be actively involved in our own cases; without challenging approaches as usual, the status quo remains firmly rooted.

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The restricted access to legal libraries and digital information that Joesph describes above is an act of what Scott Richard Lyons might call "rhetorical imperialism," which is "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate" (452). Such control is necessarily connected to histories of oppression via information (e.g., prohibiting literacy among enslaved people). These barriers come in endless other forms for incarcerated people. For example, Angel E. Sanchez describes one of his own encounters with barriers when trying to study while incarcerated: "Every time I was sent to confinement, transferred, or subjected to search-downs I was at risk of losing my textbooks. Sometimes they would be carelessly misplaced by the guards, and at other times they would be intentionally thrown away" (1671). It is experiences like these, and so many others, that convinced Sanchez that his path to becoming a lawyer after his incarceration "make[s] clear that my education was not because of prison, but in spite of it" (1672). The policies changing from on high over time, as well as the daily

operations inside, show the grammars of law flexing into the daily lives of people on death row.

Joesph's ongoing attempts to access information and be involved in his case undermine what the grammars of law intend. His acts are abolitionist, in-prison iterations of what Anna Plemons calls a "tactic," as coming from de Certeau, and what Middleton calls creative maladjustment, per King Jr. and Kohl. Both Plemons and Middleton explore the small and mighty ways in which instructors inside (those who are permitted to leave, versus those who are incarcerated) negotiate how to encourage critical thinking and creative expression in a structure designed to discourage precisely those practices. Building a critical framework from her teaching inside a maximum-security prison in California, Plemons argues that "[t]he rules of the [prison industrial complex] may, over time, be negotiated, but they cannot be ignored, because when they are, the punishment comes back—every time—on the incarcerated men and women who choose to risk community partnership" (45). Similarly, Middleton explores how "maladjustment"—not in the sense of adjusting badly but rather adjusting to what is bad—allows educators inside prisons to fully do their job. For example, educators going inside might need to "[circumvent] state policy to bring in educational materials as a normalized, complex, and situated literacy practice" (13). Joesph's efforts to learn the grammars of law and give them new syntax (e.g., insisting on approaches his lawyers may have left behind) are tactics and maladjustments that create new possibilities as he navigates and overcomes barriers to information.

As explained above, we suggest that the tactics and maladjustments that Joesph enacts over decades are an abolitionist praxis of creativity. This kind of practice, Rodríguez emphasizes, is "not merely a practice of negation—a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations—but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice" (1576). Joesph's relentlessness in reading, understanding, and participating in his appeals process works to "eliminate institution[al] dominance;" his writing to an audience beyond death row insists that this eliminating needs to be "communal." As Joesph shows above, this is not only about the law; it's also about narrative and the human experience of this process. Joesph writes: "if we are not taking control of the narrative being told in our filings, then we leave our fate entirely in the hands of people who don't know us." To do this work requires moving capital appeals process literacy from behind razor wires to beyond razor wires. It also requires people on either side of the razor wire to "know" one another.

Part 3. Magnifying Dissent

My conviction and sentencing in March 1994 were based on what I (and my lawyers and advocates) believe includes police corruption and concerted decisions to pursue the path of least resistance to find someone to arrest for the murder of a White woman (and what could be easier than blaming a poor Black man?). My legal team and I needed to see every detail that went into the investigative processes of the case, requesting access to, among other documents, the following: my trial counsel files, files from the relevant law enforcement entities, copies of undeveloped audiotapes and videotapes taken

during the investigation, and information about whether Black jurors were restricted from the jury on the basis of race. I have been denied formal requests for Discovery multiple times. This has been across circuit and state courts, spanning more than 30 years. When the courts restrict my access to these files, they deny me crucial and critical information that keeps the truth about my case in darkness.

However, not every judge agrees that I don't deserve Discovery. I'd like to use names to distinguish these judges from the majority, but I am advised right and left that I shouldn't (this advice honestly pisses me off from time to time, but I'm trying to work *with* the people trying to help me). In the case of these two judges, I will call them Judge M and Judge N. When the Mississippi State Supreme Court denied me Discovery back in 2012, Judge M and Judge N dissented from the majority. Judge N said: "I am unable to agree with the majority's findings. . . . Brown did not have access to essential material with which to assert his claim of ineffective assistance of counsel. . . . Because Discovery was withheld from Brown, I cannot agree with the majority." Me neither, Judge N.

Judge M's dissent takes a different approach. His dissent comes from within Mississippi's laws, suggesting that the other judges ("the majority") misinterpreted those laws. First, he says, "[u]nder MS Rule of Appellate Procedure 22 . . . Brown was 'unquestioningly entitled to the files.'" He goes on to say, "[t]his court's Rule 22 provides for the pre-petition discovery in order for a petitioner to file a meaningful petition. Yet, the majority mocks Brown's request by referring to it as his request for 'so-called pre-petition discovery.'" Thank you for pointing out this mockery, Judge M! Then, he considers how Rule 22 requires the petitioner to demonstrate that the request "is not frivolous and is likely to be helpful in the investigation, preparation of presentation of specific issues which the petitioner in good faith believes to be in question and proper for a post-conviction release." I assure you that there is nothing "frivolous" about me wanting to see the information that has been kept hidden from me for more than 30 years, forcing me to live in a cage, trying to piece all of this together and figure out how and why these State actors believe so strongly that the State of Mississippi should kill me.

I want to share with you one more dissent from Judge M's opinion, and I really do love the way he explains this thing. He says:

> The majority, displeased with this troublesome rule, drags in a statute that the majority says "clarifies" the rules. . . . I dissent because our rules, as they currently exist, allow [Brown] to obtain the discovery he seeks, and I cannot join the majority's acrobats in finding a way to deny him what our rules allow him to have. If the justices in the majority think our rules are too lax, then they should change the rules, and not take refuge behind a procedural statute.

Wow! All of that is pretty important, and should not get lost as my case moves from one court to another court. Just because the majority has more votes does not mean that what is happening is justice. Or true. Judge M makes it clear that how other judges deny me information (maintaining the grammars of law) and circumvent that information (by turning cartwheels and backflips to take refuge behind legislative statutes) puts me and other people on death row starting at the bottom of a very steep hill. It is these

minority voices of dissent that should take priority, rather than getting lost in the annals of justice, because the weighing of opinions on dissent is much stronger when considering the tone as well as the language used to describe the majority's actions and motives. When judges like M and N dissent so strongly from their colleagues, shouldn't that dissent echo just as strongly throughout the appeals process to the ears of the people who decide whether or not to have me murdered?

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The Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute defines legal "dissent" as the following:

> A dissent refers to at least one party's disagreement with the majority opinion. An appellate judge or Supreme Court Justice who writes an opinion opposing the holding is said to write a dissenting opinion. Unlike majority opinions and similar to concurring opinions, dissenting opinions are not binding law and, therefore, future cases are not obliged to follow them. Nonetheless, dissenting opinions preserve minority viewpoints on contested legal issues and contribute to the public debate of these issues. (Cornell Law School)

While these dissenting opinions allegedly "preserve minority viewpoints" and add to "public debate of these issues," Joesph's anecdotal experience suggests that, to the contrary, dissent is more likely to be left behind. This process of majority ruling in capital litigation offers a particularly insidious example of a "stock story," discourse that Martinez identifies as the version of events that creates "'master narratives' based on ignorance and on assumptions about minoritized peoples" (65). If the narrative about a case proceeds without what Joesph calls the "echoes" of dissent, the case becomes its own stock story. In other words, if Goldberg insists that "justice is not an event" (7), neither, we argue, is dissent.

Dissent is not an event. Magnifying dissent in a ruling throughout the appeals process and beyond challenges stock stories that structure the grammars of law. Dissent is a form of what Martinez calls "counterstories;" magnifying that dissent in a person's legal work and daily experience can alter the texture and shape of the case. Magnifying dissent makes it possible to view discourse around a capital conviction case as something other than the majority view, exposing the "crises" of the US carceral system and "reduc[ing] [its] power" (Berger, Kaba, and Stein, n.p.).

Conclusion: Dissent Is Not an Event

Some of the guys have agreed to meet every Thursday in the morning. We meet on the yard to discuss how we might advocate for ourselves from death row. We sit in our required red uniforms at this black-painted steel bench/table if it's not covered in bird shit. There is constant loud back and forth talking from state prisoners in black and white stripes or green and white stripes playing basketball or pushing breakfast food

carts or equipment carts for fixing the lights and toilets. There are correctional officers and unit administrators moving about from one building to the next escorting inmates to the unit clinic for medical care. They're all moving around us, walking to and from different buildings, so there's a constant din of noise and movement, which distracts our attention away from the topic at hand. But, when opportunities arise, I try to be present.[14]

Up until three years ago, all of us were on 23 out of 24 hours per day of solitary lockdown, without opportunities to be in community (with the exception of religious gatherings—after all, this is Mississippi). After a change of administration and new policies, we are now allowed approximately 11 hours of being around each other for social gatherings and educational opportunities. This has allowed some of us to have serious conversations concerning the betterment of our quality and quantity of life. There is no dissent among us in that goal, or in knowing that we have to join as a collective and dedicate ourselves to working together over time if we hope to achieve this goal.

However, during these discussions it has become clear that each of us has our own take on what should be done about the death penalty. Some people here, for reasons I don't entirely understand, want their death sentence commuted to life with parole. They believe reform is the most likely pathway for surviving this, and that it would give them an opportunity to be released from prison one day. Others argue for total abolishment, hoping to convince the public that executions are morally indefensible in the Bible. When I sit and consider the death penalty as it relates to *me*, then I do not hope for abolishment. If the death penalty were to end today, my sentence would become life without parole without court-mandated legal representation, and I would have to file everything *pro se*. I am a poor person who would not be able to afford an attorney. There are way too many obstacles for me and a million errors I could make, which would mean losing my appeal, and there would be no recovery. I would be trapped within prison walls with a life without parole sentence. The state has handcuffed, shackled, and caged me since the day of my arrest, and I will not knowingly do anything that prolongs my suffering.

All of us feel these different ways because we have watched Mississippi murder a lot of men, and we do not wish to be killed. We fear what is going to happen to us. We all might disagree on what to do about the death penalty, but none of us wants to be executed. We're all standing on the same ledge, and there are no easy answers. The simple act of each of us taking a breath defies the majority in this state who would have us killed.

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People living with death sentences convening in the yard to disagree about what to do about the death penalty is an abolitionist praxis of creativity. Rodríguez writes, "abolition is not merely a practice of negation—a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations—but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice" (1576). Gathering, talking, and disagreeing is most of all living, and

it is also creating beyond the limits that attempt to tell these men that they are dead. To return to Cullors's statement: "Abolition means community. Abolition does not isolate individuals. Abolition invites people in. . . . Abolition does not choose sides" (1692). Part of abolitionist praxis is co-existing—or, in this case, co-surviving—with different viewpoints.

In other words, the several dozen people whom Joesph lives next to share the capital appeals process as posted in the flowchart in Figure 1, but each has their own literacy narrative in navigating that process. No matter how un/involved each of these people is in their appeals processes, they have a level of literacy that is unattainable theoretically and removed from public discourse. Like with any genre, to more fully understand how it works and affects reading, writing, and literacy, we need to read, write, and value as many of these literacy narratives as we can. Stauffer writes, "A world, a cooperatively authored thing, can't be rebuilt by a person acting alone, especially not one with a destroyed self. It is the job of the wider world to help with the rebuilding" (80). Teaching others literacy in the capital appeals process is thus building an alternative world in which those who endure a death sentence do not experience that process alone.

The literacy narrative that we articulate in this article takes several arcs. One arc shows how a young man is sentenced to death in a grammar so obscure that it tells him he has only 30 days left to live, but this man works his butt off and learns the layers behind the language and, more than 30 years later, writes volumes about how he is very much alive. Another arc starts with a man who felt he needed to stay silent throughout his trial so that the lawyers could do their job, but who now knows that even lawyers "don't know what they don't know." A third arc might show how a man has been shuffled from court to court and denied information that would make him fully literate in his case, yet he identifies new ways for reading rulings that magnify the importance of dissent as not only disagreement, but as a flashing light to others—an illumination —that something is not what it pretends to be. Speaking beyond the capital appeals genre insists that this material is not only for those who endure a death sentence; like all literacy narratives, this literacy narrative is from and for all of us who endure a society that permits capital punishment as a practice of justice.

Notes

[1] This is an excerpt from "There Are More," a chapter in Joesph's memoir, *The Image They Had Painted* (Publication Studies, 2026).

[2] Our working relationship has been an ongoing process that began with Joesph writing and publishing 70+ creative stories and poems with Alison as his reader/advisor/editor. While working on these creative pieces, our conversations covered topics that seemed to need a different genre. Joesph's experiences with incarceration, the death penalty appeals process, and communicating with lawyers and advocates, combined with Alison's scholarly interests in writing, composition, and archives helped us both ask new questions without simple answers. It has taken years of collaboration for us to reach the point where we were able to coauthor this academic piece, which includes only a fraction of the topics that we discussed and want to keep exploring through writing. This work happens through an accumulation of drafts sent back and forth through snail mail, hours on the phone to discuss suggestions on each other's sections, and a shared belief that none of this time is wasted.

[3] Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve argues that criminal courts create a "public theater for racial degradation" (136). In *An Autobiography*, Angela Davis's own experiences in jail showed her that "the bail system is inherently biased in the favor of the relatively well-off" and that the release system is "heavily tainted with racism" (61).

[4] Wacquant writes: "*Mass* incarceration suggests that confinement concerns large swaths of the citizenry (as with the mass media, mass culture, and mass unemployment), implying that the penal net has been flung far and wide across social and physical space. [Yet] . . . the prevalence of penal confinement in the United States, while extreme by international standards, can hardly be said to concern the masses" ("Class" 78). Rodríguez agrees that the "actual historical technologies of incarceration have never targeted an undifferentiated 'mass,' but have consistently pivoted on the gendered racial profiling and criminalization of Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, poor, and colonized (or colonially displaced) Peoples" (1583).

[5] This "recklessness," Cholbi and Madva explain, is the continued practice of a system that, research shows, renders "black capital defendants . . . more likely to be subject to execution than defendants of other races and . . . those who murder blacks . . . [and] . . . less likely to be subject to execution than are those who murder members of other races" (517).

[6] It is *LiCS*'s policy to name all authors in full while balancing needs for readability. The full author list is as follows: Austin Sarat, John Malague, Lakeisha Arias de los Santos, Katherine Pedersen, Noor Qasim, Logan Seymour, and Sarah Wishloff.

[7] See Joe Lockard's "US Death Row Literature and Public Mobilization Against Capital Punishment" for an introductory bibliography of "memoirs and personal accounts" (60) from people living on death row.

[8] The co-authorship of this article is marked by these challenges. Most communication systems available to people incarcerated in the Department of Corrections systems, including in Mississippi, seem to discourage critical thinking, scholarly study, and in-depth collaboration. Phone calls are permitted in 20-minute segments, so that momentum of ideas is frequently interrupted. Mailed drafts of this article occasionally

never reached Joesph, without explanation, or sometimes only one side of the pages were scanned, so that he had only half of the draft to consider. This kind of long-form collaboration requires hours and hours on the phone beyond a more conventional co-authored article, and we believe that this extra work resists the system that prefers those inside keep their thoughts and ideas inside, too.

[9] Well, mostly in jail. I did escape for a few days, which you can read about in "On the Lam," a story in *The Image They Had Painted*. In this story, I explain why escaping does not necessarily mean someone is guilty.

[10] For now, I can tell you that after four years of being on death row, I thought I was even closer to death than I did on that very first day. When the court denied my Direct Appeal Petition, I had an execution date, and I spent three days thinking I was going to be executed. I was placed in the last cell next to the death chamber and heard the designated execution team carry out mock execution drills on live animals. I heard those animals take their last breath as the execution team joked and laughed then repeated the process on some other poor creature. At the end of those three days, I received a stay of execution from the US Supreme Court and was transported back to the death row unit.

[11] See "Waiting," a story published online by Joesph that more directly considers the toll that waiting takes on people inside.

[12] See Danielle Sered's *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair* for data showing that victims rarely feel safer or healed with people behind bars.

[13] Joesph had access to tablets when writing this article. However, in August 2026, tablets were suddenly removed from death row in Mississippi without explanation, and the men living there no longer have access to this education and communication device.

[14] Since writing this, we on death row have moved to Unit 17, which is where people are executed. We are now able to move around more "freely" than we were in the scene I write here, but we pay the price by living closer to death than we ever have.

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Mapping the Emergent Abolitionist Literacies of White Racial Un/learning

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KEYWORDS

Abolitionist literacy; White supremacy; Un/learning; Emergent strategy; Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

This article theorizes white racial un/learning as an emergent, abolitionist literacy that engages Angela Y. Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" vision of abolitionist transformation: a set of long-term political commitments to shifting social life with the immediate centering of care and harm reduction. Drawing on abolitionist scholarship, I argue that un/learning can function as a literacy technology that disrupts white supremacy. Based on interviews with white community leaders I map six recurrent practices of white racial un/learning: 1) interrogating inherited narratives; 2) interrogating participation in systems and histories; 3) naming accountability in past harm; 4) listening to decenter; 5) interrupting spheres of influence; and 6) witnessing to manage structural change. Analyzing these interviews through adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy framework, a theory of change for social justice futures, this article theorizes that shifting worldviews away from white supremacy can enable white people to develop emergent practices that can potentially transform systems of white supremacy. Rather than positioning un/learning as a moment of moral awakening or a product of corporatized diversity training, I frame it as iterative, coalitional work that gradually reshapes worldviews and their associated practices. Ultimately, my analysis reveals the necessity for composition and rhetoric to continue to grapple more directly with the targets, products, and impacts of the carceral ideologies and practices that white supremacy normalizes.

> To reiterate, rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition. (108)
> —**Angela Y. Davis,** *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Introduction

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?,* Angela Y. Davis demarcates the integral relationships between punishment and racial capitalism as tethered, in no uncertain terms, to the historical legacies and enduring targets of white supremacy. From the perspective of the United States (US) and its peers, who hoard generational wealth through late-stage racial capitalism, punishment is a product of racial control, one that dispossess the body, especially racialized bodies, as rhetorical subjects to white supremacist state-sponsored political violence. The prison as an institution is deployed as a state apparatus for political and social control that uses punishment in ways that are so deliberate that the public conceives of them as a natural part of the social order. Davis historicizes how the institution of prison is designed as punishment for the transgression of social norms and mores inherited from the legacies of bondage and dehumanization of chattel slavery in the US as a settler nation-state. Institutions established for punishment, like the prison, stem from Slave Codes or "the laws that deprived enslaved human beings of virtually all rights" (Davis 27). Constructions of punishment played an enduring role in maintaining presumptions of criminality as a rhetorical stand-in for Blackness. In other words, Davis observes that "crime" and "punishment" must be understood not as sibling terms, but as the rhetorical ways white supremacist nation-states maintain themselves economically, socially, and politically. Likewise, Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* recapitulates the reproduction of enslavement through the prison system over the last two centuries. In it, Jelani Cobb traces how distortions of criminality with Blackness served as a defining feature of the white imagination in the twentieth century. In 1915, the silent film *Birth of a Nation* strategically represented a "romantic, glowing, heroic portrait" (*13th* 06:45) of the domestic terrorist group, the Ku Klux Klan. As Cobb describes, the film is seared with and ultimately sponsors white supremacist ideas about criminality, control, and the dehumanization of Black people by manipulating the narrative structure of white imagination. Underwritten by these histories of white racial control, vis-à-vis metanarratives of criminality, the specters of the white racial imagination presuppose racial control as a naturally occurring phenomenon that must be maintained socially, politically, and economically.

These heinous histories of control and manipulation signal the deep need for abolition and, at the same time, underscore how white supremacist social systems constrain liberatory, abolitionist action and always have. As Davis notes in the framing epigraph, to drive forward the goals of abolition and liberation, it is integral to shift the

broader systems of thought that endorse and maintain institutions of imprisonment, which enduringly impose distorted fantasies of criminality vis-à-vis racial politics. That is, we need radical transformations, which ultimately mean divesting from the white supremacist political imagination. In their book *Abolition. Feminism. Now.,* Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie expand the abolitionist goal of shifting systems of thought by emphasizing the dual necessity of "[h]olding onto this both/and" (5), balancing immediate needs for safety and care for those affected by violent state systems while simultaneously striving to undo the systems that harm in the first place. Davis and colleagues' contouring of feminist abolition praxis offers instructive politics that engage the multiplicity of "both/and"—as a set of long-term political commitments to shifting organizational and social life toward antiracist, feminist futures and the immediate centering of care and harm reduction.

Driven by my positionality as a white queer man with professional and personal commitments to racial justice and organizing white publics to interrogate and dislodge anti-Blackness, this article attempts to embrace the "both/and" orientation that Davis and colleagues call for. Specifically, I turn my attention to the challenges of abolitionism under the broader systems of white supremacy and whiteness, which serves as both an epistemology and a set of racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, and ableized literacy practices.[1] I join a line of advocates for abolition who have argued that changing the systems of thought and action underwritten by white supremacy is a critical necessity for engaging more abundant, thriving future worlds (Ritchie; Wynter; Spade). As a white queer scholar-teacher, I have examined how my positionality has informed my practices for social justice through coalitional action (Pouncil and Sanders; Sanders, Pouncil, Aguilar-Smith, Smith, and Pregent), and I maintain that the ultimate goal for white people is to work in coalition with pro-Black organizations to dismantle elements of the white racial frame and to create life-affirming possibilities for racial justice. I build on these commitments to divest whiteness from the organizational and social life through small acts of white racial un/learning. By framing un/learning as a coalitional abolitionist literacy, I engage the work of emergent strategy, a Black feminist organizing framework that centers large structural change through a gradual set of practices that can create sustainable social change and transformation. I bring this energy toward knowledge and behaviors of whiteness and offer emergent strategies to explore how to uproot reproduced white supremacist carceral systems.[2]

In this research article, I theorize un/learning as an abolitionist literacy that can shift carceral and white supremacist ideologies through gradual practices. To do so, I braid together an analysis of interviews with white community leaders with commitments to racial justice, analyzed through adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy framework, an adaptable, interdependent, and iterative way of thinking about large scale social change through small repeated, and intentional action. Through such a braided analysis, I develop an emergent theory of "un/learning" (punctuated with a forward slash to emphasize its dialogic and iterative nature) as a rhetorical and coalitional framework to describe how white people with actionable commitments to racial justice interrogate, deconstruct, and dismantle their socialization into white worldviews, policies, and practices. Serving as a departure from white innocence approaches to corporatized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Ahmed,

On Being), my analysis highlights the range of literacy practices that animate shifts to disrupt white supremacist and carceral ideologies embedded in social life and emphasizes the "both/and" orientation that Davis and colleagues call for of abolitionist work.

To make good on abolitionist futures in and beyond literacy studies, I make the case that literacy scholars must invest in the study and practice of transforming whiteness and dislodging the everyday practices that sustain white supremacist ideologies. I do so through three inter-related aims. First, I situate un/learning as an abolitionist literacy by synthesizing applied theoretical traditions in literacy studies in conversation with social movement writing. I define abolitionist literacies as the practices that challenge carceral ideologies reproduced through everyday social action. Second, I introduce emergent strategy, a social movements framework used frequently in restorative justice and abolitionist organizing work, as a useful analytic tool to understand the gradual and repeated practices that can shape broader change. Third, based on "critical of whiteness" (Matias and Boucher) interviews with white community leaders with commitments to racial justice, [3] I articulate a set of six emergent strategies of white racial un/learning as coalitional, literate action: 1) interrogating inherited narratives (fractals); 2) interrogating participation in systems and histories (intentional adaption); 3) naming accountability in past harm (nonlinear and iterative); 4) listening to decenter (resilience); 5) interrupting spheres of influence (interdependence); and 6) witnessing to manage structural change (creating possibilities). Across these examples, I align social justice movement concepts to emphasize that un/learning—how white people divest from the carcerality of white supremacy—includes a range of stepping stones that interanimate the individual with the structural, as an application of Davis and colleagues' call for "both/and" orientations for abolitionist praxis. Ultimately, I draw attention to the roles of white literacy scholars to responsibly teach toward un/learning in the classroom and call to embrace complexity to disrupt, even smally, carceral white supremacist ideologies.

Approaching Un/learning as an Abolitionist Literacy

I consider abolitionist literacies as discursive and technological networks that tread toward liberation by way of coalition (Chávez), care (Piepzna-Samarasinha), and radical imagination (Kelley). As an abolitionist literacy, un/learning encompasses the "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (Gee 6), situated in conceptions of literacy as a social practice (Street), challenging autonomous, missionary, and decontextualized (Kynard, *Vernacular*) constructions of literacy. From this vantage point, abolitionist literacies are both "a politics and a practice" (Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 25) that ultimately seek to transform white supremacist imaginations through a combination of writing, knowing, and being practices. Such an approach to abolitionist literacy is an explicit engagement with Black feminist theorizations of literacy, especially those that trouble the historical fetishizing of "a paternalistic and autonomous missionary-model for literacy education" (Kynard, *Vernacular* 66). Such autonomous and missionary models of literacy sponsor a white-centered

understanding of literacy that reproduces anti-Black racial hierarchies, maliciously suggesting that approximation to white linguistic codes can liberate anyone under white Christian nationalist regimes. In *We Want To Do More Than Survive,* Bettina L. Love demonstrates how the educational survival complex, where students of color are taught to survive instead of thrive, participates in carceral, white supremacist logic through histories, policies, and technologies that deliberately harm and spirit-murder Black students. Given the undeniable harm caused by white narcissistic imaginations obsessed with control, compliance, and criminality, I advocate for transforming and abolishing the worldview and associative practices of white supremacy through white racial un/learning. However, focusing on white racial un/learning rests on individual experiences of un/learning, perceptions of action, and impact. Therefore, renderings of un/learning are always approximated. I wish to be careful here and not conflate un/learning as a corporatized buzzword in DEI spaces (the slung-together parade of workshops and Zoom sessions focused on multiculturalism and implicit bias)—the same spaces that coincidentally forgot all about those commitments to social justice. Instead, I offer un/learning as a literate technology that can transform violent and unrelenting white supremacist imaginations toward abolitionist and emancipatory futures. In framing un/learning as "insurgent, counter-disciplinary organizing" (Kynard, "Oh No" 326), I conceive of white racial un/learning to intimately explicate how white people with actionable commitments to racial justice interrogate, deconstruct, and dismantle their socialization into white worldviews, policies, and practices. In doing so, I suggest, for abolitionist literacies, a strong focus on the strategies that can shape change. Emergent strategies serve as a foundational framework to help transform dispositions of knowing and doing in decentralized yet deliberate ways.

Black feminist literacy scholars have long critiqued dominant and white notions of literacy, troubling the colonialist and settler origins of dominant literacies as a faux-savior to structurally-targeted communities. Foundationally, Elaine Richardson's work explores how Black women's practices of navigating complex social environments affirm their identities through community-care, protection, and service. Similarly, Jacqueline Jones Royster's historiography *Traces of a Stream* shows the breadth of Black women's writing practices throughout the twentieth century, seeded with activist practices. Eric Darnell Pritchard identifies restorative and normative literacy practices of Black LGBTQ people, showing how literacy can oppress by exploiting carceral capitalism and, at the same time, can liberate and affirm alternative ways of life. Carmen Kynard ("Oh No") recently observed that rhetoric and composition needs Black feminism to reject and transform its links to Enlightenment ideologies that constructed "the human" as the white rational subject. As a rejection of the white imagination, abolitionist literacies can be "about the gradual, constant creation of alternative ways of organizing life and living" (Kynard, "Oh No" 325) that are "not about a final answer, place, or mode, but an ideal of freedom and creative imagination that is always in practice" (320). A Black feminist movement toward alternative life requires an acknowledgment that "what we build is far more important than what we destroy" (Cooper 19). My entry point to transforming the worldviews of white supremacy is the kind of "active theorizing" of a "lived reality" (Kynard, "Oh No" 325), departing from disembodied notions of white knowledge-making routinely critiqued by Black

feminists who've demonstrated how power is never absent from knowledge-making and circulation, especially that of literacy.

As Pritchard demonstrates in *Fashioning Lives*, literacies for Black LGBTQ people can be both normative—tools for reinforcing white supremacist practices—and restorative—tools for self-determination and self-liberation. Their theorization of literacy, drawn from both Sojourner Truth and Paulo Freire, explicates literacy as "a practice of meaning-making that does include print, but also as a way of reading everyday life as significant to literacy practice" (Pritchard 20). Given these dual targets of literacy, I engage abolitionist literacies as those practices that shift carceral thinking and practices, both on the page and off it. Importantly, central to this discussion of the violence of whiteness, especially by a white researcher and faculty member who has and continues to benefit from whiteness as a system, must be the roles of coalition and positionality. I've argued elsewhere (Pouncil and Sanders) that my positionality as a white, queer, middle-class, and now tenure-track faculty member has impacted my commitments to racial justice and transforming inequitable institutions through building coalitions, disrupting whiteness, and creating infrastructures to divest from whiteness as disciplinary and institutional tactics. Harkening back to Davis and colleagues' call to embrace "both/and" in abolitionist work, I view coalition and positionality (Walton, Moore, and Jones) as an engagement of this dual position for shifting systems of thought.

The specific focus for my inquiry is the subject position of white people who underwrite and benefit from white supremacist superstructures. As George Lipsitz argues, white people are encouraged to maintain an *investment* in whiteness, a cashing in of holding onto white supremacy as "a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt" (vii). Lipsitz's metaphor of investing in whiteness and white supremacy helpfully illustrates the ways in which whiteness is used as a tool for political control and how resources must be hoarded in order to deny communities of color access to power. Individual actions protect the value of whiteness at the deliberate expense of people of color. For example, we can read historical and contemporary fantasies of Black criminality as an ideological investment in white supremacy. By sustaining an index of separation between humanity and inhumanity (Kynard, "Oh No" 324), the white racial imagination has circumvented itself as duly human. The broader project of antiracist and abolitionist organizing must rightfully unseat these enduring constructs about ownership, power, and investment. Lipsitz notes that the possessive investment of whiteness can also possess white people, so that they are unable to engage beyond a late-stage capitalist mental frame "unless they disinvest and divest themselves of their attachment to white supremacy" (viii). Thus, since whiteness is an investment —a purchasing of worldviews, realities, and dispositions of white supremacy—it also can be divested. Specifically, divesting whiteness recognizes that there is no such thing as "good white people" (Sullivan). Instead, divesting whiteness realizes that all white people benefit from and perpetuate legacies of white supremacy. Zeus Leonardo's *Race, Whiteness, and Education* argues for a similar version of divestment from whiteness which he calls "neo-abolitionist whites" (Leonardo), a return to co-conspirators during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries like Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb, Meg Segrest, and Anne Braden, who used their white racial identities to work in coalition for actionable

racial justice (Tatum). Leonardo frames a critical pedagogy for white people as "neither enemy nor ally, but a concrete subject of struggle" whose work is to undo "the self they know and com[e] to terms with a reconstructed identity, even an abolished one" (186). The pedagogy that Leonardo advocates for seeks to dream toward liberatory futures by divesting from the contemporary white common sense, beyond white supremacy, control, and criminality. Thus, an interest in transforming whiteness as a divestment links with the broader project of abolitionist literacies to transform white hearts and minds in order to uproot the broader structure of white supremacy. Notably, the figure that Leonardo invokes above is an uncertain one that reckons with the known self and the establishment of an emergent one. I read this kind of transformation as moving toward alternative forms of life, akin to what Kynard ("Oh No") calls for, by strategically and emphatically deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings and practices of whiteness.

Therefore, white racial un/learning considers how the white imagination can be —though often is not—a productive object of change constrained by centuries of racial framing. By focusing on the conditions of the white imagination as a system and investment in white supremacy, un/learning can serve as a literacy technology disruptive of white supremacist machinations and seeks to move toward alternative forms of life and living. An engagement with how white worldviews shift and change, as I do in what follows, is part of the broader project of abolitionist organizing and literacies that both approaches broader structural transformation and engages individuals who sustain the structural. Interrupting the recreation of white supremacist social order is the fundamental locus of my analysis of white racial un/learning. As I demonstrate below with six emergent strategies of un/learning based on in-depth interviews with six white community leaders with a commitment to racial justice, explicating practices of un/learning helps serve a macro-level of engaging the both/and element that Davis and colleagues have called to model for feminist abolition praxis.

Emergent Strategies of Un/learning

To engage Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" approach to abolition in concert with theorizing un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, I engage with emergent strategy as a theory of social change that draws on ecological and Afrofuturist tenets to transform complex social issues through a set of relatively simple patterns. Emergent strategies are social movement frameworks introduced by a Detroit-based community organizing group, the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, and publicly introduced in adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.* For brown, emergent strategies are ways "to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions" (20). Alexis Pauline Gumbs explains how emergent strategy "offers us the opportunity to study and practice the work of shaping change by understanding ourselves as part of the ongoing emergency of nature" (7). According to brown, emergent strategy originated as a way to describe "adaptive and relational" leadership practices, anchored in the work of Octavia Butler, and grew to practices and plans for collective organizing and movement work

focused on creating possibilities through change by leveraging simple patterns, such as "adaptation, interdependence and decentralization" (24).

Elements of emergent strategies are grounded in relationships to nature and its regenerative processes. brown offers six elements of emergent strategy, including fractals, intentional adaptation, interdependent, non-linear, resilience, and creating more possibilities. Together, these practices help to shape change through leveraging simple, repeated habits toward large scale change. As a movement-based framework, emergent strategy has been deployed in abolitionist movement work, as described by Andrea J. Ritchie. With the focus of attention on small patterns of emergence, Ritchie explains that while it may seem counterintuitive to focus on relying on small-scale networks instead of ready-made scripts, "heavily resourced, one-size-fits-all, industrial-scale systems are what got us here [to a police surveillance state]. Our only hope is to try something new" (93). The idea that something can be emergent (flexible and developed in the process) at the same time as strategic (followed by a clear plan), can be understood as an example of this kind of complexity—a holding on to the "both/and" disposition needed for abolitionist praxis.

Below, I share six practices developed through an interview project examining the un/learning of six white community leaders interviewed in 2021. Participants interviewed were selected if they identified as white and had a shift in their understanding of white supremacy. Participants included social justice facilitators, social workers, public servants, and social movement organizers. I developed a "critical of whiteness" (Matias and Broucher) interviewing protocol (Sanders, forthcoming). This three-phased process involved life history and artifact-based interview questions to recover histories of and with white supremacy (phase 1), invited participants to create a multimodal artifact to represent their un/learning (phase 2), and asked them to reflect on their accountability to un/learning and racial justice going forward.[4] In Zoom interviews, I asked participants to select concrete artifacts to tell and analyze stories of their un/learning. Based on thematic analysis of these interviews, a fundamental takeaway is that *when individuals' worldviews change, so too do their practices of knowing, communicating, and navigating the world*.[5] I analyze each practice below through an emergent strategy lens to help demonstrate how each of the practices of un/learning can shape change in white supremacist systems, offering alternatives for life and living. Analyzing un/learning through an emergent strategy lens helps humans understand how simple acts, habits, and dispositions have the potential to scale up and shift broader systems of power. This is especially useful for understanding how small practices of un/learning can create the conditions for the larger goal of transforming the habits of white supremacy and carceral ideologies. Thus, my analysis deploys an emergent strategy approach to un/learning as a productive engagement with Davis and colleagues' call for "both/and" because it draws attention to how individual acts and actions animate the structural. Focusing on emergent strategy is not to say that this work is easy or simple; instead, it asks us to dwell in and engage complexity by focusing on the specific recurrent actions and dispositions that can reshape social practice toward alternative, more liberatory forms of living.

In what follows, I detail the six emergent strategies of unlearning, including reflective action (fractals), interrogating inherited narratives (intentional adaptation),

naming accountability in past harm (non-linear and iterative), listening to decenter (resilience), interrupting spheres of influence (interdependence and decentralization), and witnessing to manage structural change (creating possibilities). In offering the following renderings of individual white community leaders who have engaged un/learning and shifted their dispositions through abolitionist literacies and emergent strategy, I in no way wish to frame them as static, altruistic, positive change agents or ideals for racial justice or abolition. All white people participate in perpetuating racial harm, and by no means are my participants fictive "good whites." Instead, I focused on their un/learning journey to better understand how and why white people might engage in stepping stones toward challenging white supremacy in their everyday actions. These reflections, taken together and analyzed through an emergent strategy framework, engage the different habits that can work toward the "both/and" goals of Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie that must be fundamental for abolitionist literacies through the specific target of un/learning.

Reflective Action // Fractal

> "*Small is good, small is all*" (brown 41).

Fractals, according to brown, are "never-ending pattern[s]. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop" (51). As a part of emergent strategy, fractals help humans understand that the micro maintains the macro; they are "patterns that cycle upwards" (brown 59) that invite growth, change, and transformation at the level of habit. brown looks to examples of fractals in nature, like geologic ripples, cells dividing, and so on; the core work of a fractal is to practice the small toward a more liberating future.

Thinking like and with fractals means understanding that change and transformation are constants and that micro-action created, repeated, and sustained creates large systems (galaxies, even). My interviews with six white community leaders revealed that reflective action served as one of key routine patterns. While rhetoric and composition has a persistent interest in reflection as a tool for writing development, reflective action here is more urgent and more life-affirming. I use it here to refer to the ways in which white community leaders reflected on and acted in relation to their past and future understandings of themselves as a consistent, recurrent rhetorical action. Notably, many of the participants balanced their "past selves" as a figurative measuring stick of how their beliefs and actions have shifted over time, especially in terms of reckoning with anti-Blackness. However, because un/learning is ongoing and infinite, reflections on partners' past histories, ideologies, and practices guide goal setting for future action.

The white community leaders whom I interviewed frequently used reflection to map how their enduring understandings of the world have shifted, and, at the same time, they used these levels to shape their everyday actions. Chris, a retiring faculty member and director of a social justice office, offered a reflection about her un/learning in the next phase of her life. She told me that her next steps require her to intentionally

cultivate communities that challenge "white flight," where retired people move to all-white spaces. Because Chris was moving, she felt the need to bring her community work and her teaching work together. "There is such an incredible dearth of white antiracism there," Chris told me. "I could see myself teaching, just in other ways—whether it's offering workshops, teaching a non-credit course, or establishing a reading group." She also explained that she'd like her un/learning to be a "more spiritual, holistic approach to white antiracism."

Jane, an antiracist curriculum developer for a non-profit health organization, described her goals—to center slowness and center the experiences of Black voices in how she seeks to embody her work—as a result of her reflection. She said: "I want to embody the things that I'm learning and stay malleable to what I'm doing now. I want to evolve from here, learning a new language, adopting new ways of understanding race dynamics." Jane's commitments demonstrate how her recurrent reflections of who she is and how she shows up for racial justice, in relation both to who she was and who she wants to be, make way for future habits. For Jane, destabilizing her perceived stability defines her orientation to pluralism and that such an orientation can never be fixed or "natural"—the practices she notes are a combination of listening practice; interrogation of inherited narratives; and reflective, coalitional action.

From an emergent strategy perspective, these habits have the potential to scale, and shift and change broader systems. The snapshots from Chris and Jane illustrate the ways in which the fractal of reflective action—not just reflecting on what they've learned about racial politics and whiteness, but the specific mobilizing of those dispositions into lived practice—serves as a foundational, routine habit for un/learning. Notably, reflections often move from simple, such as racial epiphany, to more complex, like the thinking-doing combinations that both Chris and Jane describe. Importantly, the worldviews of these reflections represent the slow disruption of carceral thinking. The fractal of reflection, then, requires a reckoning with carceral and white supremacist worldviews that must be named and disrupted as a core component of abolitionist literacy through un/learning. Put differently, as a fractal, reflection builds the bridge between the small and the large; the belief drives the practice. Centering reflection as a habit of systems, structures, and values helps participate in the "both/and" of un/learning, as stepping stones to deeper commitments, translating experience from knowledge to action.

Interrogating Narratives // Intentional Adaptation

> "*Change is constant. (Be like water)*" (brown 41).

While change is a constant, brown warns that change for change's sake is dangerous and a product of capitalist superstructures. Emergent strategy's approach to adaptation includes a clear focus on purposefulness, "wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing" (brown 70). Intentional adaptation, then, can be thought of as a practice of moving toward life, of setting "strategic intentions" that guide how and why our actions do

what they do. In the context of abolition, interrogating inherited narratives engages this strategic intention in balanced ways by naming how narratives and cultural fictions are operating in the dispositions of white people.

Through interviews, participants interrogated their own socialization specific to white dispositions of knowing and being, as a way to challenge and disrupt their racial habitus. Notably, this practice of looking to individuals' life histories to examine how they were socialized through racialized and carceral sets of knowing and doing practices is consistent with antiracist practices around "self-work" (Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins), "racial storytelling" (Johnson), or "archaeology of the self" (Sealey-Ruiz). From an emergent strategy perspective, intentional adaptation helps humans understand that the practice of interrogating inherited narratives is an intentional and purposeful activity to deepen their awareness of systems and histories of power in order to ultimately shape change in the future. Chris, for example, reflecting on her primary education in a newly integrated Georgia primary school, explained how early moments of racial difference—and the impact of racial difference—served as an opening for the interrogation of her identity and her early awareness of her whiteness. Indeed, Diab and colleagues warn that "confessional narratives" are not productive avenues for the development of antiracist consciousness, because they end at the confession. Instead, those confessional narratives must be challenged by placing those individual instances in the context of broader machinations of power.

Robert, who works in local government, similarly analyzed the inherited narrative surrounding his body as a cis, white man, especially as it relates to the prison-industrial complex. He told me about a writing assignment for his undergraduate degree in public policy. He was given a writing assignment paired with the book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* by Annette Lareau. Robert was instructed to analyze his childhood through the lenses of class and race. Reflecting on this research assignment, Robert had recalled a pivotal moment when he was 14 years old. He was a freshman in high school. "Me and my buddy, I don't know what it was," Robert told me, "I think we just wanted to see if we can get away with shoplifting or prove that we are smarter than [other] people." He was placed in a "scared straight" program at the local police office. As a result, Robert thought he turned his life around. After all, he finished high school, attended a well-respected research university, and earned a good job. "I was very much the hero of my own story," Robert said.

Through writing the research assignment, Robert realized the invisible forces at play that disentangled his sole-actor hero story, and the ways in which those white heroism narratives were developed in concert with carceral entities, especially the prison-industrial complex. As Robert said, "I was a 14-year-old white kid from an upper-middle-class family and the well-to-do suburbs with plenty of youth resources" and "these opportunities were put in front of me to make sure that didn't happen again." Notably, Robert's reflection was not fashioned from the life event itself, instead his un/learning occurred through a practice of critical interrogation. Placing his experiences in concert with racial and class frameworks enabled Robert to more clearly name and interrogate his systematic participation. At another level, it demonstrates the ways in which his white racial privilege humanizes his interactions with law enforcement and carcerality. He is aware that, under white supremacy, he is not

rhetorically constructed as a "criminal," echoing Davis's point that frames this article. Robert's troubling of his self-authored hero story demonstrates how the maintenance of white worldviews creates challenges for abolitionist work. Robert's analysis helps reveal how ideological residues operate as part of the natural order when, in fact, they couldn't be further from it.

Robert's story here illustrates the ways in which adaptation operates in the practice of interrogating taken-for-granted narratives. It is not the practice of change for change's sake, as brown warns against. Instead, Robert's story showcases how interrogating and reframing the stories that white people tell and are told can reveal how carceral systems of power influence those stories in the first place. The act of re-narrating his hero story allows Robert to takes residual white racial ideas to task. As for emergent strategy, the purposefulness of the narrative interrogation extends to other elements of emergent strategy as well. Un/learning, in Robert's case, reflects a making and remaking of a stable, inherited narrative grounded in exceptionalism and meritocracy. The underlying stories about who we are—and can be—fundamentally serve a white supremacist function, locating indices between human and non-human —who can be the hero in the story, after all? The act of remaking, especially in Robert's case, signals how an engagement with pasts, however ugly and uncomfortable, is part of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, as part of a complex shift from naming and critiquing carceral ideologies to shifting the rhetorical narratives that sustain them. In other words, this emergent literacy practice attempts to dislodge the cultural fiction of white supremacy that operates in everyday ways.

Naming Accountability in Past Harm // Non-linear and Iterative

"*There is always enough time for the right work*" (brown 41).

Large-scale transformation does not happen overnight, and certainly not in an easy-to-predict line. In *Emergent Strategy,* brown draws on social movement work, like Occupy and Black Lives Matter, as examples of non-linear organizing of mass movements. "In a non-linear process," writes brown, "everything is part of the learning, every step. That includes constructive criticism, it is part of the feedback loop—experiment, gather feedback, experiment again. This is how we learn" (106). Framing un/learning as non-linear helps push against perfectionism and precision in everyday abolitionist literacy practice, showing instead the complex and time-dependent ways in which humans organize toward purposeful action. At the same time, it's critical to remember that learning is never neutral or innocent; instead, learning, especially about the margins of power, inextricably impacts communities of color, often placing an uncompensated burden on people of color. For un/learning, naming accountability does not solely rest on the act of narrativizing harm, such as non-confessionals (e.g., Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins) or as empty apologies (Ahmed, *Complaint*). The naming of past harm can shift the practices that are associated with the original harm, and the carceral logic embedded in that harm. Since the broader project of abolition must rest on transforming everyday habits, iterative emergent strategies help emphasize how things can change.

For un/learning, non-linearity plays out through an understanding of disrupting forces of socialization and naming accountability in past racial harm. My interviews with research participants often returned to moments where their whiteness adversely affected people of color in their lives. Each partner could recall a series of instances where their ways of being caused harm, which served as a springboard to changing the behavior and seeking out different perspectives to challenge the practice that incurred harm in the first place. Bianca, a graduate student who focuses on social work and community engagement, recounted an experience in college where she enacted anti-Blackness by telling her Black friend, Morgan, that she could not be alone with her. Bianca's disposition of distrust of Blackness inherited from her parents showcases how she internalized and perpetuated anti-Blackness. Naturally, her relationship with her friend faded, and she felt shame and guilt about how her white worldview enacted violence on her classmate. To establish an analogue to abolitionist literacies, these kinds of racialized thinking-and-being combinations reproduce the naturalization of institutions that capitalize off carcerality. Even years later, Bianca is aware of how her white ways of knowing fundamentally harmed Morgan, and she seeks to be accountable for her past practices without demanding labor or acceptance from Morgan. She told me:

> I want to be accountable. I want to atone and to learn from this. I wanted to do better. At the time, I did not know how, and now, I guess I still don't fully know how without recentering myself. I want to ask her, 'What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to do it?' But that would put the burden on her, and it belongs to me.

Bianca's reflection about the roles of accountability and reconciling past harm motivates her un/learning practice of seeking out and compensating Black creators' content regarding anti-Blackness. However, we should read Bianca's reflection as an enactment of a stable DEI approach to justice that focuses on rules of engagement. It seems that Bianca's reflection is a performance of scripts she needs to say. However, if we read her reflection as a representation of an iterative type of un/learning, it represents an early stepping stone to, perhaps and potentially, a political or professional commitment. What is interesting in Bianca's reflection here, though, is how she imperfectly and even performatively must labor with and dwell in her past harm for emergent and transformative praxis. In her reflection about accountability, her explanation that the burden of accountability belongs to her represents a clear moment of insight; she knows, at this moment, that her responsibility to reconcile her past harm is not labor to be put on Morgan or other people of color. By dwelling in this space of accountability, it becomes clear that Bianca's orientation to herself has changed. She realizes that the labor of un/learning is hers to do and does not call on others to educate her on her behalf.

Bianca's story of dwelling in past harm and seeking to refashion how she sees and moves through the world reflects the non-linearity of un/learning, and at the same time reinforces how carcerality must be critiqued in early stages of the non-linearity of un/learning. While perhaps a less advanced stage on the spectrum of un/learning, Bianca's reflection here is significant to name early and rudimentary steps toward developing

more deep and advanced engagements with un/learning, while also understanding the ways that these early observations of accountability might reinscribe carcerality. It's apparent in the ways in which she names the racial harm she has committed and, at the same time, works to shift them, always imperfectly, in the future. This set of emergent strategies helps showcase the non-linearity of Bianca's un/learning—it requires placing the past in concert with the present and disrupting the lived-in habits that proxy as white supremacist violence. I take up Davis and colleagues' call for a "both/and" approach to abolitionist praxis as a white person to complicate and deepen these reflections that Bianca narrates.

Listening to Decenter // Resilience

> "*Never a failure, always a lesson*" (brown 41).

For brown, resilience is how individuals, systems, and nature recover and "[transform] the conditions that make injustice possible" (125). They explain how resilience is about changing conditions, especially after traumatic and harmful events. The natural world is full of examples of "adaptive survival brilliance" (brown 125), such as the ocean's ability to create life through the coral reef (brown 24) and how mushrooms transform toxins into nourishment (brown 124). brown notes that this resilience is the work of "healing and transformation, moving towards a world beyond enemies, [and] is work that has to be done for our survival" (133). As a component of un/learning, resilience, then, places the burden of healing and changing conditions for injustice onto rebuilding, re-articulating, and transforming through destructive systems and environments, such as white supremacy or white Christian nationalism.

For my research participants, resilience serves as a process of shifting inherited white supremacist and carceral logics that lead to oppressive conditions in the first place. As Frankie Condon reminds us in *I Hope I Join the Band*, "[T]he aim . . . is not cross-cultural communication, but the deconstruction of the logics of racism . . ." (88). In other words, changing the logics of racism through an emergent practice of resilience , at its best, destabilizes regimes of narrative and knowledge that produce harm. One of the foundational ways I observed this occurrence was a shift in white community leaders' listening practice.[6] Jane explained how listening, particularly to Black folks, must be thought of as a sacred covenant. As an antiracist learning specialist, she is aware of the ways in which white people's un/learning is often unfairly predicated on the emotional labor performed by Black people, a labor that is never owed and never compensated. She noted the violence implicated in demanding such emotional labor from Black people to justify their humanity to whiteness. The labor of Black people explaining sacred cultural knowledge, often anchored in their survival and humanity, to white people can be costly and dangerous, if not engaged with responsibility and accountability. Jane described her relationships with Black people as something that must be sacred because of the inherited histories of her body as a white woman:

> You can just respect the experiences of Black people as precious and sacred. Part of the doubt, the downfall, the con of whiteness, is that nothing is really held as sacred in the culture because we have fought and

> spent generations and decades and everything else forcing our cultural norms onto other people. And so, when you come across knowledge or art, these are ways of survival. It feels like white people should not even be aware of these things. When Black people are sharing with me the experience of Blackness, and living in a white supremacy culture, I hold that as really sacred. I just want to honor those experiences and never question them.

Jane's description of the sacred bonds of being in community with Black people illustrates resilient practices like decentering white normative subject positions through listening practices. One key concept Jane described is that Black people don't owe white people anything, including cultural knowledge. One of Jane's interview artifacts was the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, as Lauryn Hill had been rumored to express hope that white people not purchase it. Jane had to pause here to consider that not everything is for white people's consumption, gaze, and entertainment.

Jane's reflection about the labor of Black folks illustrates how she seeks to engage: with both accountability and responsibility. In this way, listening becomes an integral component of engaging un/learning in concrete ways. Particularly, listening implicates different ways of sensing, interpreting, and engaging the world, and thus serves as an emergent literacy practice for un/learning. By using listening as a tool for decentering, partners enact a shifting worldview that is race-conscious and intentionally seek out counternarratives to disrupt singular, self-affirming white worldviews. This kind of shift, in both practice and the pro-Black philosophy that undergirds the practice, reflects how resilience, the shaping of conditions that move toward life, operates at a macro-level.

Interrupting Spheres of Influence // Interdependence

> "*There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it*" (brown 41).

brown explains how interdependence is when "we can meet each other's needs in a variety of ways . . . we can truly lean on others and they can lean on us. It means we have to decentralize our idea of where solutions and decisions happen, where ideas come from" (87). brown critiques late-stage capitalism as maintaining a competition culture; instead, an emergent strategy approach means that humans' needs are met from community and coalition. They argue that humans must engage in complexity as a part of interdependence—a way we all work toward more distributed decision-making, shared leadership, and care. They write: "[E]veryone I am in relationship with, creat[es] an abundance of connections, desires, interactions, and reactions" (brown 88). This kind of decentralized and interdependent thinking is reflected in the ways in which the white community leaders I interviewed understood themselves to be working toward change. In particular, I read their practices of decentralization as an opportunity to move toward life, particularly through interrupting their sphere of influence.

Chris further explains how a kairotic moment at her current university interrupted its structure toward justice. Chris told me a story about her search for a job to lead a

social justice institute at another university. She explained that she did not want to leave but could not do the work she wanted to at her current university. Chris told me that her friend, Anne Braden, suddenly passed away. As she told me:

> I didn't really want to leave, but it was a better job offer. And right in the middle of that decision, Anne Braden died very unexpectedly. I just countered the Dean. I told him, 'I don't really want to leave; why don't you set up a center like that here? Why don't we do that?' And he was like, 'Let's do that.'

Chris's story about building a social justice campus unit reflects the ways in which she worked intentionally to disrupt the machinations of her university further toward justice. This creation was modeled after her relationships with the community, the campus, and her work with social movements. This example showcases how Chris's positionality and a kairotic moment afforded her such a place to interrupt for good.

Chris spotlights how she's interacted with their spheres of influence in rhetorical and distributed ways, demonstrating that transforming conditions happens through more dialogic and distributed ways of knowing and being. This engagement of un/learning as a practice of embracing complexity complicates the black-and-white thinking characteristic of carceral white supremacist imaginations. These reflections operationalize Chris's awareness of who she is, the influence that she has, and the choices that they can make toward a more life-affirming choice. While Chris's case does focus on an institution of higher education, it's important to note that her practice of advocating, in this case for herself, can be understood as embracing complexity and working toward justice in an intentional way—a broader institutional shift toward healing and community-engaged social movement work. When read as distributed and decentralized literate acts, Chris's reflection reveals how un/learning can contribute to critical counter-institutional organizing strategies, both small and large, that move toward more robust forms of life and living, especially within a cold and relentless political system.

Witnessing to Manage and Advocate Change // Creating Possibilities

> "*What you pay attention to grows*" (brown 41).

brown explains that environments are complex and chaotic, and that singular treatments or strategies to engage them are broadly insufficient. As she writes:

> [T]here is evidence that many possibilities exist for how we manifest inside our potential. Then there are wavicles—entities that are simultaneously waves and particles. Then there is quantum mechanics, which examines the smallest units of our universe and shows that everything we think of as solid and singular is actually fluid and multitudes. (brown 156)

Across former examples, I showcased how emergent literate acts surfaced as a way to move toward affirming life and living in more holistic and compassionate ways.

For research participants, creating possibilities to move toward life happens through advocating change and witnessing. By this I mean the ways that humans move beyond interruptions and practice advocacy to shift and change policies toward transformation.

The most apparent way that witnessing and advocacy played a key role in creating possibilities was through Nicole and Robert's use of their office and official positions to advocate for change in local policies. Nicole, the director of the Office for Financial Empowerment, a municipal office in the Midwest US, and Robert, her colleague, described the ways that they intentionally resisted inequitable policies. As Robert explained, "Policies have been weaponized in the past against marginalized communities, and policies can be used to have positive impacts." Across both stories, they explained how their office received a grant to support the reissuance of suspended driver's licenses for minor infractions, like parking tickets. Their analysis revealed that these policies most directly impacted Black men. Such an analysis represents a shift in macro-level policies in an attempt to slowly dislodge carceral practices that maintain prison pipelines.

The office received grant monies to research how to mitigate the harm of this fee-driven practice. As Nicole told me:

> My constant learning is that we do this thing as city governments that even the most progressive units of city government, where we're studying the problem, we will rope these people in and give them a $50 gift card to spill their whole sob story. And then we will move on with our lives as though nothing happened. We don't change. There has to be "what's next?" Because if there isn't, we used those people for no reason. And so yeah, we paid them to tell us their story. But now we have to do something with the story, or we're causing harm.

Nicole told me that, after a few attempts to do focus groups, she and Robert decided they would use the grant monies to pay the fees to get suspended drivers' licenses reinstated. Nicole explained that she had to answer to the funder, who didn't love the idea, because they wanted the funds to be used for research. "But I was like, 'Look.' I was like, 'At the end of the day, you must answer to your funder.'" Nicole also talked about her administrative knowledge around budgets: "If you don't spend it, and it's a grant, they have to leave the grant account open because it's not legal to push that into general funds of the city. So we just quietly bank these little piles of money for good." This example showcases how Nicole and Robert use their positionality to "resistantly read" grant requirements toward specific, justice-centered ends. Through this kind of individual attention, individuals harmed by such a policy were able to have their fees paid. Beyond the individual interventions or "band-aids," as Nicole calls them, she worked with Robert to advocate for a change in the policy that produces suspended licenses based on nuisance fees, like parking tickets.

As a practice of creating possibilities, Nicole and Robert managed inequity through witnessing and advocating for change in their spheres of influence. From an abolitionist literacy perspective, literacy practices are an attempt to weaken state structures that fetishize "criminality" under carceral systems in local state governments. As they both admit, they struggle to identify the specific balance between pushing

and not pushing enough, realizing that pushing too hard might not engage productive change. As Robert said, "I also have days where it's just too slow. We got to do more, we got to be bigger and faster. It'll take forever if that's, if our approach is one person at a time, when we need massive policy change at the city level." Robert's reflection illuminates the double binds and paradoxes involved when moving from individual change to structural change. Perhaps most notably, Nicole and Robert's reflections demonstrate "both/and"—how scaling up to create new possibilities can be developed from their un/learning in order to disrupt carceral systems in their spheres of influence. The act of creating new possibilities based on un/learning is an attempt, even momentarily, to shift a system and policy.

Emergent Un/learning, Race Treason, and the Charge of Literacy Studies

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's presidential address at the American Studies Association observed that abolitionism offers pathways out of a web of political, economic, racial, and cultural crises: "[W]e must direct our energy and resources . . . toward the goal of freedom, which I'm going to call . . . radical abolition" (41). Radical abolition, guided by engaging with the Black Radical Imagination, seeks to hold a both/and complexity approach to moving toward life and living. As Davis and colleagues note in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, holding onto complexities of contradictions is fundamental to the contours of abolitionist feminism. They beautifully address the different practices that sustain a feminist-abolition movement toward life and living, which is worth quoting at length.

> [A] politically informed practice . . . demands intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression. Building on these foundational approaches, this theory of change proclaims that we can and must do multiple things at the same time. We work locally and internationally. We hold people accountable and believe that people can change. We believe in being radical and active. We reflect, learn, and adjust our practices. We react to injustice. We build different ways of living. We are clear that organizing to end gender violence must include work against the prison industrial complex—against border patrols, against the incarceration of disability, against the criminalization of radical democratic protest—and as centrally, for mutual aid, cop-free schools, reproductive justice, and dignity for trans lives. All this is possible because the 'we' is not a set of individuals but rather a collective that grounds and defines its members and the projects, goals, and campaigns that are connected to the everyday, thus encompassing joy and struggle. Inextricably. (Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 4)

In this article, I've attempted to embrace this both/and approach to un/learning as an emergent abolitionist literacy to map developmental patterns that hopefully develop more politically- and abolitionist-engaged work. My analysis highlights how whiteness

has supported the carceral literacy practices that got us here in the first place. As many, many other scholars of race, power, and education have argued, the fundamental goal to move toward socially-just, decarcerated futures means directly working to uproot the carcerality of white supremacist ideologies that manifest in everyday ways. After all, white supremacy, which does its damnedest to reproduce the same systems and ideologies that gave way to the rise and maintenance of chattel slavery, is why the most obscene violations of living occur. Scholars of literacy, then, will do well to remember that violations of humanity are maintained in the very structures of our knowledge, teaching, and theory. Lamar L. Johnson, in this vein, has reminded us that the spirit-murder experienced by Black people in the classroom is no different from the acts of racial violence experienced on the streets. The conditions for these experiences have been fashioned through the carceral systems of knowing that, whether we are aware or not, we reproduce.

My analysis of six emergent literacy practices offer ways of thinking about un/learning as part of the broader strategy of abolitionist literacies, transforming the systems and practices of carceral white supremacy. As literacy scholars have long known, ways of knowing impact ways of moving through the world, both on and off the page. My focus is on how white community leaders came to understand and interrogate their socialization through white supremacy. In particular, I draw on six elements of emergent strategy as a movement-based framework that engages Black, queer, feminist practices for organizing life toward liberation. The practices I map above all work to shift a carceral worldview and its associated practices. I wish to be clear here that these are my ways of understanding, confined always by my own whiteness. My analysis of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy, and also a set of emergent strategies, pays homage to foundational movement work and engages the Black feminist visions of future-making that our discipline so desperately needs. At the same time, I acknowledge that more practices exist than the ones I've identified here. I posit that more work could uncover how these practices might converge, and even complicate, the emergent strategy framework I've drawn on in this article.

My interviews with these community leaders demonstrate how *when worldviews change, practices change*, though often slowly and smally. Notably, many of the participants I interviewed were at different stages of their own un/learning, but the index of emergent literacy practice I offer here shows the different ways in which they revise their knowing and doing combinations (Gee). While we may want large-systems-level change here and now, emergent strategy teaches us that change is purposeful. Kynard reminds us of this lesson: "Black feminism is about the gradual, constant creation of alternative ways of organizing life and living and alternative ways of communicating in and about those lives far beyond our current alienating regimes" ("Oh No" 325). So, to echo the fractal principle of emergent strategy, "Small is good, small is all" (brown 41). As I have demonstrated, un/learning is a spectrum of development with early stepping stones to deeper and larger commitments for engaging coalitional action that divests from the carceral histories and structures of white supremacy. I do, however, want to caution that the over-reliance of the individual can often obfuscate the power and sway of a system, even as the system, as an abstraction, is represented in and by individual actors. Anchored by Black feminist critiques of

literacy, my analysis here offers a way to think about the constant, gradual changes needed for abolition through un/learning. In no way do I hope that these portraits reify the fictive "good white person" mythology that rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies often obsess over.

Yet, at the same time, my inquiry offers pathways to consider how white scholars can engage, research, and teach toward un/learning. Especially in a cultural moment defined by a rise in conservatism and bolstered by white nationalism, my call to the field here is to focus on white racial un/learning, as a part of abolitionist literacies, as one of the foundational and engaging commitments of the social and professional work of the field. In a "nice" field (Ladson-Billings) like ours that is demographically and ideologically white, white teachers and researchers hold the responsibility to foster un/learning as a set of ongoing dispositions. As other antiracist scholars have argued, this begins with interrogating narratives, values, and identities to locate the specific targets of whiteness on communities of color. Given the current issue's focus on abolition, and how taken-for-granted white racial dispositions function as part of the same imaginary that produces and reproduces anti-Blackness in constructions of crime, punishment, and justice, my analysis of my participants' un/learning offers a set of takeaways, especially for white literacy professionals. While I offer additional considerations below, I urge readers to consider and complicate these takeaways.

The first is to call into question inherited and taken-for-granted simple ideas, especially those that are unquestioned in our professional practice, and embrace complex thinking about ourselves and our practices, locating how unchecked practices and ideologies are extensions (or even enactments) of carceral ideologies. Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of this work is to complicate our relationships to expertise, stability, and other taken-for-granted dicta. For instance, the strategies I analyzed above call into question stories of who knows, who is an expert, and what expertise looks like. These portraits show that stable expertise in who we are and what we know must be unraveled. For example, take Robert's reckoning of his hero story; how do literacy professionals make space for the reckoning of undoing a stable self? I might invite engagements with this question in our local curriculum, our professional development, and our community work. I'm curious what it looks like to decenter ourselves as white people as the subject that can know. Relatedly, it's critical to remember that the ethos of a knowing subject replicates Enlightenment thinking that has persisted, creating indices of who is human and who is not—the very same carceral logics at work in the prison-industrial complex (Kynard, "Oh No"). By dislodging stable and taken-for-granted schemata, embracing complexity leads us to embrace tension and paradox in useful ways. On the ground, this might look like shifting how and why we value certain types of inquiry and text-production—calling into question what might be "clear," and to whom? Additionally, my analysis here also reveals the necessity for the field to continue to grapple with the targets, products, and impacts of whiteness, calling for deeper engagement—especially of and by white people—toward naming, interrogating, and shifting the carceral practices of whiteness. While there are excellent white scholars who write about and teach against white supremacy, the field needs to continue to cultivate critical whiteness scholars and teachers who are especially equipped to support

other white people, white institutions, and white students to reckon with their own whiteness.

The charge to literacy studies, then, is at once simple and complex—another lesson from emergent strategy. Given the ways in which literacy has functioned as both liberatory and emancipatory, and/or oppressive and carceral, it's integral for literacy scholars and teachers to divest from those white supremacist worldviews and practices that produce the practices that constitute carcerality and criminality. While literacy work may feel far from the target of corporatized anti-Blackness, Love's work has demonstrated that literacy has always been at the seat of underwriting the carceral surveillance function of education, directly contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. If abolition requires an embracing of complexity, literacy scholars must be aware of how literacy can serve white supremacist aims. At the same time, the challenge must be for white scholars to engage, research, and teach toward un/learning. This move toward reconstructing the white worldview away from white supremacy must take up what Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey call being a race traitor: "The abolitionists are traitors to the white race; by acting boldly they jeopardize their membership in the white club . . ." (36). In a time when we see the gleeful rolling back of equity-minded initiatives and a giddy rise of white Christian nationalist authoritarianism, it's an understatement to say that our collective responsibility is to tread toward life and abolish whiteness as a social category and carceral ideology that creates the conditions for lifelessness in the first place, especially for those of us who are white.

Notes

[1] Charles Bazerman's theory of literate action demonstrates how social order is reproduced through acts of writing, literacy, and rhetoric.

[2] While some scholars distinguish white supremacy—the global political system of "formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth . . ." (Mills 3)—from whiteness—the everyday practices associated with white people as naturalized racial ontologies and ideologies (Leonardo)—it's key to note, following Marxist critiques of social order, that the political and ideological structures of white supremacy (as ideology) are dynamically reinforced by whiteness (as material practice). As Asao B. Inoue points out, drawing on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The maintenance of whiteness and white supremacy . . . is vital to maintaining the status quo of society's social, economic, and racial hierarchies, the structuring structures the (re)produce a white racial habitus" (50). Inoue's concept of white racial habitus demonstrates the interplay between localized everyday practices, such as language, worldviews, and politics, that reinscribe the targets of white supremacy and white nationalism.

[3] This article reports on IRB-approved data with an exempt determination from Michigan State University (STUDY ID 00006285).

[4] I have discussed this methodology in more historical, theoretical, and pragmatic senses in a forthcoming piece (Sanders). The three-phased interview protocol I developed focused on critically interrogating whiteness and invited participants to bring three concrete objects to tell stories of their un/learning, create a multimodal artifact, and pose future-facing accountability plans.

[5] In an earlier version of this research (Sanders), I represent this phenomenon through a three-phase cycle of coalition, adapted from Pouncil and Sanders, demonstrating the cyclical work of un/learning across internal, external, and systems levels. In this iteration, I share a similar set of rhetorical and literate actions mapped to elements of emergent strategy. I do this to demonstrate that routine practices can shape change and therefore can serve as foundational elements of un/learning as an abolitionist literacy practice.

[6] Readers familiar with feminist rhetorical traditions might make a natural connection to Krista Ratcliffe's theory of rhetorical listening, a rhetorical strategy for listening across cultural logics. This is a slight departure from rhetorical listening, as I am engaging Condon's description of white antiracist practices. While there may be some connections between these two concepts, listening to decenter is a deliberate attempt to remove oneself as the knower. Listening to decenter departs from rhetorical listening because, in this tradition, listening is about understanding alternative cultural logos, not a practice based in the destruction of racialized habits, and thus a less stable subjective position than rhetorical listening posits.

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We Keep Us Safe: Abolitionist Literacies in the Work of Lu Lu Livingston, At Your Service

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KEYWORDS

Abolitionist literacies; Homelessness; Self-determination; Liberatory care; Interdependence

ABSTRACT

This article discusses three abolitionist literacy practices—interdependent safety, self-determination, and liberatory care—that Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service relied on in her work as an organizer with the Kansas City Homeless Union (KCHU). Livingston's use of these literacy practices is representative of the ways in which abolitionist activists teach their fellow activists as well as broader publics how to read the world differently. These alternative readings of the world not only resist the continuation of carceral logics—in this case, as present in discourse around homelessness in Kansas City, Missouri—but also open pathways to non-carceral, abolitionist futures.

Content Warning: detailed discussion of gun violence

> "You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there."
> —Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, private interview, July 11, 2022

Sometime in the winter of 2020, Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service—a white woman in her 40s "with mental illness and determination," as she asked me to introduce her[1]—arrived in Kansas City, Missouri, in her truck, which she was living in by then. Her truck and identity were stolen from her shortly after she arrived, causing her to take on her current name: Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, a combination of her home city of St. Louis (Lu Lu), her adoptive grandmother's last name (Livingston), and "at your service" because "I've been out there in the streets . . . you learned that you're gonna have to work real hard if you're going to survive," as she explained to me once in an interview. Later, that part of her name would also be called an expression of her commitment to serving the homeless community (Plake).

With nowhere to go during a record-breaking cold winter, Livingston found herself at the Bartle Hall Warming Center in Kansas City, an emergency center set up by activists and volunteers after Sixx, a Black homeless man, was found frozen to death on New Year's Day, 2021,[2] just days after his camp had been destroyed ("swept") by city officials. At first, Livingston said she was excited by the warming center's program for homeless residents volunteers to help run the space—only for her to be told a few days into volunteering that the city had formally taken over the center and was cancelling volunteers.

Livingston told me she left the warming center and started wandering up the street, upset that the staff had gone back on their word to include homeless people in running the shelter. It didn't feel right or real to her, to not let homeless people participate in running a space for themselves; she said she'd "rather freeze and starve"[3] than participate in a system that no longer felt right or real.

Then Livingston came to City Hall's front lawn, just a few blocks from the warming center, and saw a small group of tents. She approached a member of the camp, asking if she could borrow a tent and stay there that night. He said she'd have to talk to Qadhafi—and so she did.

Qadhafi is a formerly incarcerated, Black, homeless man who spent many of those incarcerated years writing out his plans for a homeless union in pieces he published through organizations like the Anarchist Black Cross. Livingston said he told her, "That wasn't a homeless camp; it was a protest, and we were occupying. We were trying to affect policy and change, and that was really important." Then, he offered an analysis of why it mattered to camp. Livingston described this meeting to me in one of our interviews:

> Shelters are actually a business. If there were no homeless people, there wouldn't need to be shelters, so they have a vested interest in keeping homeless people homeless, and so it was a revolving door. And it sounded so obvious once he said it, once you thought about it . . . and that was honest, and that was truth, and that was reality. (Livingston, July 7)

She stayed in the camp and quickly became Qadhafi's right-hand organizer, because the thing you have to know about Livingston is that when she says something is real, and honest, and true, she'll stake everything on living out that belief.

I first met Livingston on March 23, 2021, a cold, rainy day, while I was livestreaming for Independent Media Association (IMA), a citizen journalism project I normally edited and wrote for. IMA Founder Andrei Stoica had gone out of town, and when the organization received news that the camp was under "sweep threat," I gave my best attempt at filming instead. Stoica's style of citizen journalism, which documented participant voices through livestreams, had built trust between IMA and Qadhafi, who often mistrusted other media outlets' tendency to chop his story into soundbytes rather than representing unhoused voices in their entirety. The city was insisting these sweeps weren't happening, and we hoped IMA's recordings would expose their lies ("Kansas City Homeless Union Sweep. 11th and Harrison. Kansas City, Missouri"; Stoica, "Protest against Houseless Camp Sweeps in KCMO").

As Livingston and many other homeless people would tell me, sweeps—when Parks and Recreation, backed up by the police department, goes in and bulldozes a homeless camp—are horribly traumatizing and often leave people who can't get into shelters displaced once again. This is one symptom of what Grace Kyungwon Hong identifies as the logic of neoliberalism itself, "an epistemological structure of disavowal . . . *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life . . . *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death" (7). In this case, sweeps—which, as we saw with Sixx, certainly exacerbate death—are frequently justified by saying that homeless people have the chance to get to shelters, or get a job, or otherwise live a "respectable" (with all the racialized and gendered connotations of that word) life. Livingston, in our very first interview together (see Fig. 1), pushed back:



FIGURE 1. A screen capture from Livingston's interview with IMA, quoted here or available at https://youtu.be/wU7_af9QsVY.

> How you doing? Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service. I'm here, I represent leadership of the Kansas City Homeless Union. I'm out here 414 12th

> Street. I just wanted to let you know, we're out here in this weather, it's cold, it's rainy. And it's representative of some of the weather that really negatively impacts the homeless population. We can't get out of this. We have nowhere to go. We have no one to turn to. We don't have a roof over our heads.
>
> This kind of weather is exactly what devastates us . . . our clothing gets wet. We don't have dryers that we can throw in. We don't have, you know, somewhere that we can turn to that we can just protect ourselves. So we have to get rid of those clothing, we have nothing, you know? We can't carry wet clothes around with us. So we just shed those items. We have to wait until the rain is over. We have to stand here, freeze and shiver. You know, if we had homes, that would really be, you know, something that would help protect us to really help us out—not just a shelter, but a home, you know? And that's the first demand of the Kansas City Homeless Union. That's why we're here. If you want to come around here, I can show you some of the tents and things like that. Over here, this is why we're here. This is why we do this.
>
> So our first demand is homes, you know, and if we had those homes, we can also give our people jobs fixing up those homes if we could get those homes from the land bank that Kansas City has. So homes and jobs. Those are our first two demands.
>
> Now access to water is our third demand so that we could be able to wash up, so we could be able to wash those clothes, so we could be able to use the bathroom. COVID-19 really devastated us. So that's homes, jobs, and water.
>
> Now the last demand that we have is a seat at the table. We really need to be able to talk to people, talk to the city council, talk to representatives. We need to be at that table so that we could really impact how they see us, how are our issues are dealt with. They need to know because the dividing line is so vast. You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there. It's not just a weekend camping; the people that do all want to understand and come out and you know, camp for homelessness and things like that. They still get to go home after that weekend. We don't. There's no way out of this. You know what I'm saying? So [if] we could just get a seat at the table, that would really impact us and make everything a lot better.
>
> So that's our four demands. That's all we're asking for: homes, jobs, water, a seat at the table, and that would make all the difference in the world. Lu Lu Livingston, out. (Fitzsimmons, "Update Kansas City Homeless Union")

That final demand—for not just homes, jobs, and water, but also a "seat at the table," might at first seem to be asking for inclusion in the very system that was actively harming her. However, Livingston's broader argument, here and elsewhere, would require that the table change completely—something she would recognize more explicitly later on in her work. In this video, she treats lived experience as a kind of literacy—implicitly

asserting that a lived, in-the-body kind of understanding of the day-to-day experience of homelessness is a prerequisite for epistemic authority in public discourse related to homelessness. What does it mean, she asks here, for the public to become literate in experiences of homelessness? What norms do they have to pick up? What sources should they consider authoritative?

"We Keep Us Safe": Some Academic and Activist Context

> "We don't commit crimes; we commit acts of survival."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

As both an activist and a scholar of abolitionist rhetoric and community literacy practices, I return often to the ways in which Livingston's work addressed the root causes of homelessness and worked to create new, life-affirming conditions that helped people help each other reimagine *safety* as something we create for and with each other —not something that requires police, or prisons, or the hoarding of resources. In many abolitionist spaces, "we keep us safe" is an often-repeated refrain, meant to reassert that policing doesn't keep the vast majority of "us" safe—we do that for each other. This is the kind of work Livingston did—building power among homeless people rather than waiting for the state to stop criminalizing them and meeting needs along the way. She did it through literacy, yes—through the speeches she gave, the stories she told, and the pages upon pages of writing she used to try to imagine our way to a better world—but she also put action to those words. As I'll argue below, the undoing of carceral systems and the building of life-affirming futures became how she *read the world itself.*

For example, after Livingston finally got housing, I showed up to her new apartment on Christmas Eve with dinner for her and "a few people" she'd said were staying with her. There were eight, plus their pets, in her tiny apartment, not counting those who came by briefly for laundry or a bathroom or to say hello. I lost track of their stories as she told them, all the reasons they struggled to find housing or couldn't go to a shelter, the different needs they had. There was no question, for Livingston, that keeping people safe from the weather was as much her responsibility as the city's—maybe especially because the city wasn't doing a very good job of housing people at all.

There's a longer history behind such abolitionist action, of course. *We keep us safe* is one of those logics that enact Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "life-affirming institutions" (qtd. in brown 1) that nurture rather than constrain and incarcerate life. If Stefano Harney and Fred Moten were correct in arguing that abolition isn't about just tearing down prisons, police departments, or the other myriad reinventions of chattel slavery, "but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society" (Harney and Moten 42), then *we keep us safe* is one small, discursive move towards that kind of shift. If we keep us safe—if we really *do* that, collectively, effectively, with accountability—then for what do we ever need the police?

But there's more than literacy work that goes into keeping people safe. Safety requires material moves towards interdependence, care, and prioritization of people's self-determination. However, all of these components *also* represent a kind of literacy —which is to say a way of reading not a text but the *world* (Pritchard 20)—and perhaps even simultaneously reading the world we have and the worlds that could be, which other abolitionist scholars have called "prefigurative politics" (Lin, Pykett, Flanagan, and Chávez). At the risk of being too broad, I'm assuming here that literacy is an umbrella term encompassing all of the communicative and analytical skills involved in processing and participating in various communicative situations. We build these skills based on our presuppositions about the world—our "terministic screens," to use the rhetorical term (Burke). Because we filter communication through socially constructed and influenced lenses/screens, literacy is also inherently political (Licona and Gonzales; Brandt; Paris and Alim), and so it would make sense that radical movements with radically different foundational logics will have literacy practices built on those differing foundations. A part of what Audre Lorde was talking about when she argued that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99) was that the *rhetorics*, the *ideologies*, and perhaps even the *literacy skills* we borrow from a patriarchal, racist, linguistically-supremacist state-educational complex will not dismantle that complex. Our critique of said complex won't dismantle it, either, as critic la paperson has compellingly argued; but, as they also argue, we might turn the tools of the system against itself (paperson). Perhaps more so than any organizer I know, Livingston knew that critique itself gets us nowhere—but that strategic misuse of existing systems can be crucial for liberation.

We keep us safe is too often just something people say and then neglect once ICE is at their door asking about their neighbors or police are in the street in riot gear. However, there are many abolitionists who live and die by that logic, whose every communicative moment throughout their work demonstrates how radically different we all might conceive of the ways we write, speak, story, use our bodies to communicate, or otherwise move through the world. Livingston was one of those.

Thus, this article focuses on how abolitionist literacy practices as exemplified by Livingston's work make good on the claim that "we keep us safe," and how this shift not only transforms the kinds of literacy skills we deploy around care within movements, but also makes possible futures that affirm rather than cage *life*—not one life, not only human life, but life broadly and with all its contradictions (Johnson). My overarching argument is this: Livingston deployed a set of not just abolitionist but *life-affirming literacy practices* that countered the hegemonic cultural narratives that harm Kansas City's homeless communities—and this includes narratives of criminalization but also well-meaning narratives from housed advocates. For example, in many activist and academic spaces, the preferred term for Livingston's community is "houseless," meant to draw a distinction between not having a *house* and not having a *home*, which might well be a vehicle or a tent. However, Livingston and other homeless participants in my study were always adamant that this term softened the harsh reality of being homeless. "Homeless" was the term they used to describe themselves, and thus is the term I generally use in this piece—because, as I discuss, self-determination is one of the three

literacy skills for reading the world that is crucial within Livingston's organizing and abolitionist organizing more broadly:

- **Self-determination:** Self-determination for abolitionists like Livingston means something radically different than the pass/fail test of self-determination cast in, for example, healthcare settings or in policy used against those with disabilities. Articulations of self-determination like Livingston's reframe the concept not as an earned right, but as an *inherent* right to self-define (including defining the terms used to name you). This framework provides a concrete starting point from which to imagine and discuss the balance of personal autonomy and interdependence.
- **Interdependent safety:** Unlike state models for "public safety," which are predicated on surveillance, punishment, and policing as the methods by which (certain) people gain access to "safety," Livingston's rhetorical model treated safety as an interdependent project—one we all contribute to, enact for each other, and define both individually and for ourselves. *Safety* for Livingston had an invitational, almost familial quality to it, grounded in her work around harm reduction.
- **Liberatory care:** As many critics of the prison-industrial complex have pointed out, sites of "care" often function as extensions of incarceration (Ben-Moshe; Schenwar and Law). These—along with the ways in which "care" for the homeless also tends to function paternalistically at best and carcerally at worst—necessitate a kind of critical literacy around care that helps us differentiate between liberatory care and carcerality disguised as care. Abolitionist conceptions of interdependent safety and self-determination lead us here: to an understanding and deployment of *care* in precise, critical, and non-coercive ways, both in material and discursive contexts.

While there are clear ties between abolitionist thought and movements and Livingston's commitment to non-carceral forms of community safety, the ties between homeless activism and abolition go deeper still. Homelessness *is an abolitionist issue.* As Livingston once told me in an interview, "we don't commit crimes; we commit acts of survival" (July 7). Clarifying this distinction was front of mind for Livingston throughout her work, and her framing highlights the foundational link between abolition's longstanding critique of crime as a social construct (Davis). From bills criminalizing homelessness (Bates) to the disproportionate number of homeless people who are formerly incarcerated, homelessness is just as much a part of the prison-industrial complex as are educational systems (Annamma; Price), psychiatric systems (Ben-Moshe), and other institutions that extend the reach of state incarceration further into our lives.

It feels like an understatement to say that homelessness is a pipeline to prison—perhaps a closed loop is a better image. The National Alliance to End Homelessness and Federal Bureau of Prisons report that 40% of homeless people are Black—compared, at the time of writing, to 38% of incarcerated people (and only 13% of the overall population)—and this number is notably *not improving* ("Racial Inequalities"; "BOP Statistics"). In Kansas City, the 2024 numbers were similar—35% of homeless people were Black, despite Black people being 26% of the city's population ("Point in Time"; "Kansas City, MO"). Livingston herself is white and has not been incarcerated, to my knowledge, but many of her fellow organizers are Black, and many (regardless of race) were formerly incarcerated. Experiences of incarceration often bar people from

shelters and other housing services, which means they end up sleeping on the street. Especially given recent anti-homeless executive orders that I will not dignify with a citation, sleeping on the street means risking further criminalization for "illegal camping" ("What the Recent Executive Order"). State policy around homelessness is not a pipeline to prison; it's a circle—one that frankly resembles its own prison bars the longer you look at it.

Homelessness as a state of being maintained by state policy functions not only as an excuse to criminalize predominantly Black and brown people for *existing in public*, but also as a manufacturer of what Jasbir K. Puar has called "debility" (13), or the debilitation of people's bodies via capitalist and state-sanctioned violence. Prisons, too, function as instruments of debility—propping up whole private prison industries while destroying the bodies/minds of those locked inside. Homelessness, similarly, props up the interests of landlords and developers who, instead of *housing people* in the hundreds of vacant homes in places like Kansas City, purchase properties to leave vacant, tear down, flip, or otherwise keep out of the grasp of those who need those places to *live*. This system, like incarceration, disproportionately impacts Black and brown people—leading to high rates of mental and physical illness or debility. Livingston once told me in an interview, for example, "If you don't have mental illness before you get on the streets and you end up on the streets, I guarantee you by the time you get off the streets, you will have some sort of exacerbated form of anything you already had, and you definitely have PTSD" (July 7). This was true for her, as well—she identified as having mental illnesses, including borderline personality disorder and PTSD, both of which were exacerbated by homelessness. As Livingston's situation exemplifies, of course, these kinds of systemically racist systems ultimately harm *everyone*, regardless of racial identity—although certainly not in the same or even proportionate ways. As Ruha Benjamin puts it, "inequality makes us *all* sick" (16), which is why, for example, disability justice activists and scholars have long placed movements for disability justice within the broader context of movements against white supremacy, imperialism, and settler-colonialism (Piepzna-Samarasinha; Jaffee).

Whether discussed in this broader context of abolition or not, homeless (self-)advocacy has been a longstanding part of literacy studies, specifically community literacies. Paula Mathieu and Diana George, for example, have written about homeless-led independent newspapers, sometimes called "street papers," as preeminent examples of public writing (Mathieu and George). Nedra Reynolds considers homeless communities in defining streetwork as a way of helping students "expose some geographies of exclusion and how they operate" (133). Melanie Loehwing writes about how the concept of "home" is itself rhetorically constructed—and how having a home is often equated with being a citizen—perpetuating a rhetorical kind of harm alongside the physical harm of not having shelter (4). Of course, it is not just having a home that is connected to citizenship; rather, literacy itself is connected to normative expressions of citizenship (Wan; Pritchard). Particularly, it's been all too easy in our field to treat literacy as a kind of "savior" that will transform "bad" citizens into "good" or "productive" citizens—rhetoric we see in discussions of prison writing programs (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad) but also in homeless advocacy, which Korey Tillman calls out for patterns of "coercive benevolent policing"

(635). In fact, given that there is a well-understood pipeline from being incarcerated to being homeless (Wooten), and given that being homeless is often, as Loehwing argues, equated with being a bad citizen (or not a citizen at all), the criminalization of homelessness reveals how these rhetorics are just a reinvention of the rhetorics of criminality that lead us to police and prisons.

Livingston's ways of reading the world in her activism is representative of the work other abolitionist activists do more broadly: her rhetoric was complex enough to hold and care for many different lived experiences; it prioritized people's autonomy and self-determination as a center-point of, not a determent to, collective movements; and it redefined safety as something we all build together, with each other and not at the expense of each other. When she narrated her experiences, her community's experiences, and her visions for movement, her stories took these—self-determination, interdependent safety, liberatory care—as givens, and I'd like to argue, in telling a part of her story here, that those *givens* prove to be a truly transformative way of reading the world.

Background, Framework, and Methodology

> "The difference between my camps and other camps was . . . my camps were the cleanest. My camps, we had minimal violence. We had minimal problems. We worked together. We had a huge sense of community. And we fostered that. We built on that. And I did that on purpose. I did it by making people feel involved and mak[ing] them feel important. I made them feel like they did it themselves. I gave them a sense of hope, a sense of pride."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 11, 2022

When I started this article, I was primarily focused on the citizen journalism project, Independent Media Association (IMA), which I worked with as an activist and then as a scholar while living in Kansas City from 2020–2023, before moving to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where I now work. I planned to talk about community media as a kind of counterstory (Martinez) that challenges the narratives that media and the state craft about abolitionist movements, why those literacy practices matter, and how they tie to broader movements for media justice. I was writing the section where I explained what this project is—a kind of "patchwork, participatory-critical rhetorical ethnography" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe; Middleton, Hess, Enders, and Senda-Cook) born out of working with IMA from 2020–2022 before I ever started research, built from fragmented journals, active participation, after-the-fact interviews, and short fieldwork trips.[4] In addition to interviews, I thematically coded hours of recorded video of activist events, looking for how we talk about people's bodies, health, and well-being within abolitionist movements. I came away with a clear sense of the ways abolitionists are redefining the foundational terms of public debate—beyond all the other work these movements seek to accomplish. So many movements that the media jumped to labelling as "failures" were anything but; they've remade what public debate about safety and well-being in Kansas City *means*, and there are fewer clearer examples of this

than the Kansas City Homeless Union as storied by citizen journalists (see Fitzsimmons, "Storying Access").

And then, one afternoon in January, I left a meeting on my new campus, 700 miles from Kansas City where I'm now working as an assistant professor, and opened a text from a fellow activist telling me that our friend (and one of my research participants), Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service, had been shot in the head in her home by a man who'd only recently been released from prison and was, like many formerly incarcerated people, facing homelessness (Plake). She'd taken him in; by his own report, he was lacking access to mental healthcare he sorely needed. It turned out to be easier for him to access a gun. It's hard, as a student of abolitionist movements, to read the news account of what happened and *not* note that he didn't escalate to using that gun until police were standing outside the door, yelling to be let in, and that their presence once again did the opposite of deescalating *anything*. "Who do you serve? Who do you protect?"[5] indeed.

On January 29, 2025, Lu Lu Livingston At Your Service died from the wound to her head after weeks of fighting. I went back to my data looking for her voice, because I couldn't think about anything else. In the end, I pulled out the two interviews I'd done with her, every livestream I could find that she'd spoken on, and the work of KCHU more broadly; I'd known, academically, that I needed to narrow the scope of this project, and grief, as it turns out, sometimes focuses your mind into tunnel-vision. I went back through just her data, looking for emergent themes, looking for the story arc, the literacy skills. I had already coded all of this in my broader study, and so those themes—around embodiment and health and access and safety—certainly tinted my analytical glasses, but I was also looking for *her*, for my friend, for what she believed and what abolitionist literacy practices might've meant to her. I coded thematically, looking for literacy practices in their broadest definitions, and then looking and coding for how they were abolitionist, which is to say "a keyword that assembles a range of practices, insurgencies, movements, languages, and vocabularies across ecological, political, social, and aesthetic formations" (521), as Omedi Ochieng and Amber Kelsie have defined abolitionist rhetorical studies. Reading for these practices and "taking literate action" (Flower 44) in the world *through* them, as I will argue Livingston did, is the core of abolitionist literacy studies.

I found myself captivated by how frequently Livingston talked about care and safety along with self-determination. These emergent themes fit what I'd always heard her say about herself and what others said about her: she was a mother to that camp. She cared and kept people safe and fought fiercely for their dignity—and it is around these themes from the data—from her public speeches and the two extended one-on-one interviews I did with her in 2022—that I've organized this story of her. I've woven her voice throughout—from the livestream interviews she did with citizen journalist volunteers (which included me at the time) with Independent Media Association, from the two interviews she and I did together in 2022, and from her own publicly available social media—to showcase these quiet, radical reframings of core concepts within and beyond rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies. In this way, my framework is less an application of our field's concepts to analyze Livingston's work and more the reverse case: using her work to comment on, expand, and reimagine what it might mean to

become literate in livable, abolitionist futures—for the homeless, and for the rest of us. Ersula Ore called recently for abolitionist rhetorical studies to "*move away from* a disciplinary fondness for incrementalism and fugacious reform, and to instead *move with* an ethic and ethos anchored in a radical understanding of the rich transformative potential of the field's alignment with abolitionist movement theory and rhetoric" (v), and I would argue that a part of doing this is to allow activists' frameworks to guide, reshape, and make our theories, understandings of literacy, and ways of doing literacy in the world. My methods and the framework I ultimately offer aim to do just that.

All the way through writing, I wished I knew exactly what she would say about the end of this story—the one where her work doesn't keep going at the end. I wish I could text her and ask, like I normally would've, if she'd read this draft, or parts of it, to make sure I didn't misrepresent her, or to ask her a clarifying question the way I did when I worked on earlier pieces of this broader Kansas City project. But having had the privilege of knowing her, I have a guess about what she'd say about how her story ended. I know she wouldn't have regretted taking him in. I know, too, that she'd point to the systemic issues here—asking why the city didn't offer him services, why we continue to incarcerate people and cause harm to their mental health by doing so, why we don't house and treat people instead of incarcerating them and then rearresting them for being homeless, why it was easier for him to get a gun than care, why "care" would've come at the expense of his autonomy even if jail hadn't been how he accessed it. We'd talked many times about how she wanted housing-first, non-carceral approaches to homelessness, how those efforts should be overseen by people with lived experience of homelessness, and how they shouldn't strip people of their autonomy as a condition for getting housing or demand that people perform sobriety or sanity or a particular religion in order to earn said autonomy. In other words, she wanted solutions that were *life-affirming* before red tape, before rules, and before questions of who "deserves" what.

Once, I asked Livingston whom she imagined as the audience for her work as an activist. I've asked many activists this question—part of my standard interview protocol about activist composing and literacy practices. Many of my participants have articulated multiple audiences for their work—sometimes speaking to their communities, sometimes to state leaders, sometimes to the broader public. Livingston was somewhat unique in her answer, articulating, instead, a specific person.

One day, Livingston told me, she'd been flying a sign on a street corner when a man slowed down, rolled down his window, and yelled at her to get a job—an all-too-common refrain that homeless people hear when in similar positions. Her truck had just been stolen, with all her possessions and paperwork, and she told me how what she'd wanted to say was that she wanted to get a job, but she had no identity documents anymore, and without an address, she couldn't apply for new ones. It left her caught in a vicious cycle—one where homeless people lose or have their documents stolen, cannot apply for new ones without an address, cannot get an address without a job, and cannot get a job without identity documents and an address, creating a closed loop of bureaucracy created by state policies that are quite literally leaving people out in the cold.

Livingston couldn't explain that situation to the man in the span of such a brief interaction, but she's been explaining ever since. "That's the kind of audience that I think of—the non-believer, the person that . . . doesn't understand the stigma, that full-on doesn't know, you know, never experienced it, they're looking at it from the outside in" (July 7), she told me. Her work bears this out—that she spoke with the "non-believer" but refused to capitulate to stigmatizing rhetorics to do so, that she maintained her commitment to care, to interdependence as a means of survival, and to self-determination as the starting point for her public and private work.

In so doing, her work began to undo some of the rhetorical harm created by the stigmatizing rhetorics around homelessness (Loehwing 4)—not just for housed people to understand, but for members of her own community. She should be here to tell you this story herself, but she's not, because the world she fought for remains far out of reach for many of us—for now.

Self-Determination

> "That's a person. It's a human being. He's got a story, got a life, and he probably doesn't want to be on the streets, either. If he does want to be on the streets, then he should have the right to self-determination too. He should be able to choose that."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

In disability movements, the slogan "nothing about us without us" has long been a rallying cry—meant to encapsulate an insistence on disabled people's right to make decisions about their own lives. Broadly, the Kansas City Homeless Union made the same basic argument; they argued for city discourse around homelessness to shift away from a public conversation defined by the perspectives of professional advocates and other housed people (people without the lived experience of homelessness) and towards discourse that prioritizes lived experience. Of primary importance in this reshaping was this concept of self-determination—that homeless people should have the right to self-define what, for example, health or well-being meant for them, rather than having service providers do that work. This was an issue Livingston discussed in two qualitative interviews she did with me in the summer of 2022. There, she talked about the ways in which many "outreach" programs and advocates are focused on

> not necessarily what they're doing *for* the homeless, more what they're doing *to* the homeless . . . neither one of which involves allowing the homeless to decide, you know, anything about their lives. 'Well, you're gonna stay in the shelter tonight. You're gonna get up at 6 am. You're gonna get out there. You're gonna do this stuff . . . [but] we're not pets. We're people. (Livingston, July 7)

In these one-on-one interviews, Livingston said her response to such rhetoric was to try to represent stories—whether her own or others'—that challenged stereotypes around homelessness, asking them instead to read homeless narratives through the lens of this inherent right to self-determination: "I try to make it so that I'm not the typical

homeless person they see. And I try to make it so that they can listen to my words and use them to build in their head a different idea of who they're talking about" (July 7). She told me she wanted people to see a homeless person on a sidewalk and realize, "that's a person. It's a human being. He's got a story, got a life, and he probably doesn't want to be on the streets, either. If he does want to be on the streets, then he should have the right to self-determination too. He should be able to choose that" (July 7). Livingston used her body, her speech, her engagement with media even when she did not want to,[6] in order to make the argument that people should have the resources to decide what they need—whether that's housing or not—and be able to act on it without fear of there being strings attached to those resources. Instead, she argued that services, policies, and nonprofit housing organizations should resource homeless people's ability to make decisions about their own lives and to live as safely and happily as possible while doing so, and without conditions; this insistence on self-determination was the rhetorical starting point for all her conversations throughout her work, and she expected it to become housed people's starting point when trying to understand her community.

While Livingston talked about presenting herself via normalized literacy skills to city officials—sitting up straight in meetings, "using my big words," (July 7) and the like—these performances of normative literacy skills were, for her, a means to an end. She used these kinds of skills to frame the resourcing of self-determination as interdependent—which is to say, the idea that we depend on each other to live full, safe lives that we have autonomy over (Kittay; Mladenov). This approach stands in contrast to the hyperindependent model of self-determination, which frames the ability to make decisions about one's own life as a right that must be earned through particular behaviors, particularly related to participation in capitalist economies (holding a job, paying rent without assistance, etc.)—an ableist model which has been thoroughly critiqued in disability studies (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole). Nirmala Erevelles, for example, has argued that essentializing rhetorics around disability "locates persons with cognitive/severe disabilities outside the margins of 'active' citizenship" (148) because the rhetorics around those who will need substantial, lifelong supports often imply (or outright state) that this need for support equates to a lack of *competence*. "It is in this oppressive context," Erevelles writes, "that persons with cognitive/severe disabilities are perceived as (ir)rational and (non) autonomous—qualities that are then equated with noncompetence, nonstatus, and ultimately noncitizenship" (149).

Livingston's model, however, is different. As perhaps most clearly exemplified in the quotation that opens this section, Livingston argued for support and self-determination even for those who don't perform those kinds of "rationality" (e.g., sleeping indoors) or autonomy (e.g., ability to be financially "independent"). She argued for homeless people to have full participation in the decisions that affect their lives *without strings attached*. For example, in Livingston's first interview with IMA, she appealed to the Kansas City public like this:

> I just wanted to let you know, we're out here in this weather, it's cold, it's rainy. And it's representative of some of the weather that really negatively impacts the homeless population. We can't get out of this. We have nowhere to go. . . . This kind of weather is exactly what devastates us. . . . You know, if we had homes, that would really be, you know, something

> that would help protect us to really help us out—not just a shelter, but a home. (Fitzsimmons, "Update Kansas City Homeless Union")

Here, Livingston uses terms and starting points that housed audiences would be familiar with, even appealing for "help." However, she's specifically not arguing for "help" as a prerequisite for homeless people gaining autonomy over their lives; "a seat at the table" is, after all, the union's fourth demand. Instead, she explains: "We need to be at that table so that we could really impact how they see us, how are our issues are dealt with . . . You do not truly understand homelessness until you have genuinely been there." That is, she argues that the lived experience of the homeless community, when making public decisions that primarily affect them, is not even "just as good" as city leaders' or nonprofit directors' perspectives, but rather is epistemically authoritative in ways that these other sources will not and cannot be.

This kind of assertion of one's lived experience over and against dominant narratives not only highlights an alternative interpretation to the stigmatizing narrative that "homeless people leave their clothes by the wayside because they're lazy," but also invites the broader Kansas City public to read homeless people's stories through this same lens—and to take action accordingly. This narrative pattern, I would argue, represents a practice of life-affirming discourse towards abolition's life-affirming institutions; it steps outside of civic debates and institutions that gatekeep who has access to survival resources and instead asks us to focus on how we are all implicated in helping to cultivate the "streams of resources" ("Resist Policing") that support our lives —as we define them, rather than as they are defined and circumscribed by the state.

Interdependent Safety

> "I'm helping people out, but I'm also creating structures. It's not necessarily, you know . . . it's not necessarily about like control or anything like that. I was just thinking at the time [that] if we work together, we can make this work, try to keep the camp picked up, so people aren't having an excuse to call the cops, and having people come in and all this stuff. . . ."
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

Livingston also deployed literacy skills by 1) reading discussions of "safety" and recognizing them as carceral when that's what they were, and 2) practicing a resistant, interdependent reading of safety, which she in turn taught others through the "structures" she references above. As discussed in the previous section, interdependence stands in direct contrast to the hyper-independent model of self-determination so frequently critiqued in disability studies (and still promoted by the medical-industrial complex). Disability Justice group Sins Invalid describes interdependence thus: "We meet each others' needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives" ("10 Principles"). As implied here, interdependence is particularly important for discussions of safety, which are tied up with self-determination in the sense that "safety" is often mobilized to mean "a state of being free from harm or fear of harm," which, of course, becomes fraught when "fear

of harm" is attached to certain bodies, whose "safety" or protectability never seems to matter once they have been labelled criminal or otherwise expendable (see Rowland; Agamben). In this way, safety rhetoric operates carcerally via two basic rhetorical moves: the equating of "safety" with policing, and the function of policing as the removal of particular bodies to whom "criminality" or lack of safety has been attached. The equating of "public safety" with police is a common rhetorical move reflected in foundational state documents, including the annual budget, where "public safety" is often (as in Kansas City) simply "police" and "the fire department" (Lucas and Platt 9), despite the hundreds of people that the Kansas City Police Department has killed and brutalized just in the last few decades.

Once police are rhetorically equated with "safety," it becomes easier to invoke "safety" as tied to the absence (enforced by police) of particular bodies that have criminality attached to them. In the context of housing discourse, we see this invocation of safety rhetorics when affluent neighborhoods engage in "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) rhetoric, arguing that homeless shelters and transitional housing cannot be built in their communities (Gent). Instead, these communities push for homeless people, whom they perceive as criminals, to be removed—directly or indirectly—by police. "Homeless people are allowed to exist," the rhetoric often goes, "just not in my backyard." In other words, police enforce safety by ensuring that propertied classes are free from having to see a homeless person. Whitney Gent cites examples in which housed residents in New York decried the increasing number of homeless men as a safety issue (140). As Gent points out, NIMBY rhetoric mobilizes democratic processes to claim that housed residents are being excluded based on the fact that they are not being allowed to exclude—and, more precisely, to use police to exclude—homeless Others from their communities (141). These kinds of invocations of "democracy" emphasize not justice, but rather a kind of hyperindependence in which it becomes *unjust* for someone's existence to inconvenience another.

In Kansas City, the homeless union faced even more insidious "safety" rhetorics. After the initial encampment on City Hall's front lawn, Qadhafi and Mayor Quinton Lucas negotiated a deal to move everyone in the camp into hotels temporarily, with the promise that everyone—some 463 people at the largest count, Livingston told me—would be housed (see Fig. 2). However, the hotel program was ultimately cancelled—and many people remained homeless. Now dealing with summer's blistering heat rather than winter's bitter cold, the remnants of the union returned to city property, this time camping in the park behind City Hall. Livingston explained (full interview below; "I was feeling myself that day," she told me later, about this interview):

> At the end of the hotel stay, we had nowhere to go. I am among those people that just . . . don't have anywhere else to go. I have no family, I have nowhere to turn. So what happened was we left out on our own and we had intended to begin other things, like we were going to begin an occupation of City Hall [front lawn] again. However, they fenced off the city hall [front lawn].
>
> Now they claim that it's because they needed to have some safety issues covered due to the parking garage being in failing shape. Underneath, which, I mean, that's logical and reasonable, except why wouldn't you

> close the whole building? You know, if everybody's, you know, trying to be safe here. But so they blocked off the . . . lawn so that we didn't get there. There was a small section of lawn on the side we tried to utilize just to get something fired up, didn't work out so well. They ran us off within three hours. (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Update from Ilus")



FIGURE 2. Qadhafi (left), leader of the Kansas City Homeless Union, meets with Mayor Quinton Lucas (right) on April 5, 2021. Photo by Andrei Stoica, Independent Media Association. Used with permission.

In the situation Livingston describes here, we see carceral safety showing its true colors: it's not and never was about homeless people's safety, but the safety of city property. Instead of rehearsing all the ways in which the use of police to enforce the protection of property at the cost of people's humanity reflects its legacy as a modern iteration of chattel slavery, I'll just note that the city treated abolitionist movements this way throughout the entirety of the George Floyd uprisings. Leaders of Friday Night Protest were confronted by ex-police counterprotesters over tying a Black Lives Matter flag to a police memorial with twine (Laurel). Anti-police occupiers at city hall found that Kansas City's mayor was more inclined to call to check on an allegedly-defaced memorial than to check on a victim of police brutality (Stoica, "KCMO City Hall").

The city didn't treat KCHU any better, and the union worked from the outset to forward their own definition of safety. For Livingston in particular, harm reduction was a key part of how she kept her community safe (in fact, her last social media post shows that she was out doing this work shortly before she died; see Fig. 3). However, as with other forms of safety, her use of harm reduction insisted on people's self-determination and a resistance to state control over what harm reduction means. This approach places

Livingston's work within what Micah Hobbes Frazier, as quoted by harm reductionist Shira Hassan, defines as Liberatory Harm Reduction:

> In Liberatory Harm Reduction we say let's get underneath and get to the root cause of things, because if we don't get to the root of things, then we're going to be constantly responding instead of creating new ways of being in new conditions, really setting ways for people to be their best selves, be safe, be well. Instead of continuing to respond to crisis, to trauma, to violence, to harm, Liberatory Harm Reduction can pull out those roots and then plant something different. Is it white supremacy? Is it patriarchy? Is it someone's trauma? Like what allowed and supported this risk to happen in the first place? That's our work. (qtd. in Hassan 27–28)

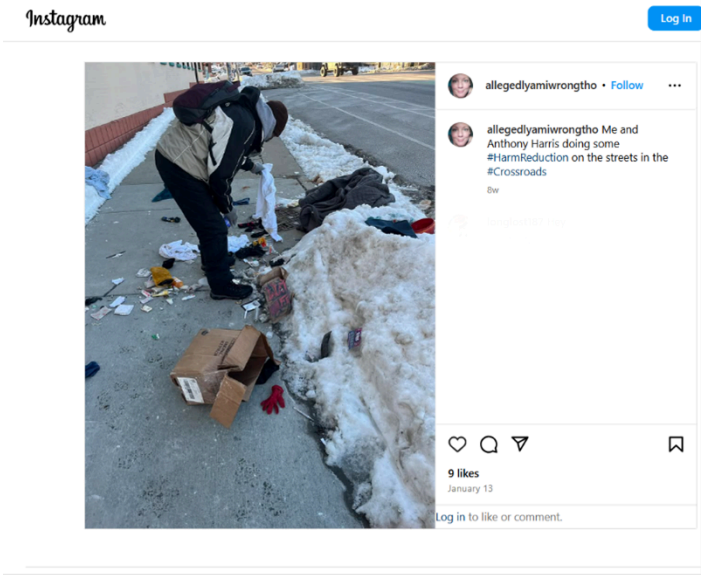


FIGURE 3. Screenshot of Livingston's last Instagram post. Posted January 13, 2025, and captured March 8, 2025.

Livingston's work was similarly focused. While she was out "in the streets" doing harm reduction work, her behind-the-scenes work advocated for housing-first solutions to homelessness, and transitional housing models led specifically by people with lived experience of homelessness. Livingston believed in working with the city to access resources when it was expedient to do so, but for long-term solutions, she emphasized supporting homeless people where they were and letting them guide what transitioning back into housing looked like for them, rather than punishing people for not "healing" on some specific timeline.

This approach also guided how Livingston engaged with law, policy, and state power. While Livingston wasn't the sort of person to arbitrarily follow rules, she did mobilize particular performances of rule-following as a way of working together to prevent harm. As with every other activist initiative to take up some kind of protest outside City Hall, the union faced the unique challenge of surveillance on all sides—City Hall on one side, Kansas City Police Department Headquarters on another, the county courthouse on a third, and the city employee parking garage on the fourth. The tall, concrete buildings funneled the wind down towards the tents—bitterly cold, nowhere to walk to get warm or use a bathroom that was open past business hours, no bystanders to witness whatever acts of state brutality happened in the dark.

Livingston knew that the last thing the camp could afford to do was give the police a reason to enter, and thus a part of interdependent safety was working together to keep them out. In one of our private interviews, Livingston described walking up to a group of residents who were smoking weed, waving her arms as if she was upset, and then telling them, calmly, that this was her acting like she was upset so the cameras picked up that there was "order" being kept in the camp. "We're going to have people that are going to use," she explained, "[but] don't leave this shit everywhere. Pick up after yourself. Keep it in the tent. Keep the door closed. We don't need everybody seeing all this stuff" (July 7). While an abolitionist or liberatory approach to harm reduction does not depend on the state to create safety, Livingston knew—as many abolitionists do—that keeping people safe from the state is a key part of what harm reduction looks like. Even as she did so, she worked to build alternatives—such as getting residents of the camp involved with keeping up the camp collectively:

> I'm helping people out, but I'm also creating structures. It's not necessarily, you know . . . it's not necessarily about like control or anything like that. I was just thinking at the time [that] if we work together, we can make this work, try to keep the camp picked up, so people aren't having an excuse to call the cops, and having people come in and all this stuff, getting people to work together to, you know, serve dinner . . . keeping stuff clean, security . . . having people work together in groups to help them feel like part of something greater, because they would want to participate. (Livingston, July 7, 2022)

These small, often linguistic, choices created a different kind of atmosphere in the camp: one where everyone was responsible for everyone else's safety (i.e., keeping cops out of the camp), meeting each other's material needs (meals, etc.), preventing harm (via non-police security), and, perhaps most importantly, modeling the kinds of valuing of each other that the city, the media, and the housed world refused to offer them. It was this community-building that earned Livingston her "mom" reputation within the camp, and that appears to have been the greatest threat to City Hall; when housing vouchers finally came, Livingston pointed out how she and other camp leaders were suddenly housed first—even before much longer-term residents of the city (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Housing Update"). This move was intentional, she told me—an attempt by the city to break apart the leadership of KCHU—and she fought to ensure this wouldn't happen, continuing her work taking care of people through everything

from running what amounted to a small shelter out of her home, to convening a group of predominantly homeless or formerly homeless activists for a grant-writing class so they could try to fund their own solutions, to harm reduction work and using her own social media to tell stories of homelessness herself.

Livingston called the kinds of practices she used in (and beyond) the camp "creating structures," and some of these were communal or social structures—but they were also literacy-based structures. Livingston's discursive choices demonstrate how cultivating particular literacy practices—ones that highlight shared responsibility for survival (interdependence), mutual respect for each other's humanity and self-determination, and a definition of safety not grounded in policing—might redefine a kind of citizenship, or at least collective belonging, that exists outside of state-defined citizenship.

Liberatory Care

> "We couldn't just agitate, because you have to be able to give people something so that they want to give back, you know what I'm saying?"
> —Livingston, private interview, July 7, 2022

In this interview, Livingston was discussing the end of the hotel program, as she slowly realized that services weren't getting delivered as promised. She began acting as a kind of case worker, helping people connect to existing resources all the way until the program ended. She knew from the first day with KCHU that it was more than a camp, but here we see that, for her, it is also more than a protest: it's about meeting people's needs, which included community, shared governance, and mutual aid—all practices KCHU had in place at the camp but which were impossible to continue when the city spread homeless people across different hotels all over the city.

In her description of this time, we also see that Livingston's model of liberatory care held care not just as an internal practice; it was also an organizing strategy. For her, a part of *care* is understanding and attending to the self-interest of those who are—or who you want to see—involved in your movement. Meeting actual, tangible needs is part of why people show up to movement spaces to begin with (Spade 12–13) and meeting those needs as a central—not supplementary—part of organizing is part of what makes care liberatory.

We talk about care frequently in our field—in the classroom, in scholarly spaces, in community spaces, for ourselves, for others (Blankenship; Hatrick; Noterman and Meyerhoff; Novotny; Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, and Yergeau; Wilson). But for Livingston, there is a particular literacy to reading, recognizing, and labeling "care" as such. Like many homeless activists, Livingston frequently pushed back against misconceptions about what care looked like within the homeless community and from housed people to homeless community members. These interventions define a kind of liberatory care, which I argue is a way of reading care through a critical, abolitionist lens.

In the end, when the city failed the vast majority of residents in the hotel program, and they all ended up back outside at Ilus Davis Park, Livingston's plea to the Kansas City public on IMA's livestream also centered care:

> I care about all these people. They matter. And I want to make sure they don't get hurt. And I want them all to have a home by the end of this, they should have had it by the end of the 90 days, the 90 days was supposed to be an emergency, temporary stay until permanent accommodations could be found. And it was supposed to be a minimum of 90 days. . . . And then they dropped the ball. I mean, we could have had the pallet houses. Those could have been done by now. But they . . . don't want to spend money on that. I'm not trying to mention any names—*(cough)* Katheryn Shields—and yeah, [the] shrieking harpy tried to, you know, block this and say, "Oh, well, I care about the homeless." But, you know, [blocking the pallet home project] . . . discounts everything they say before that. No, we need homes. We need jobs. We need water. We need a seat at the table. (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless Union Update from Ilus")

Here, Livingston defends a reading of *care* that invalidates what the city is, to her, falsely labelling as such. For her, promises of care without material action *simply are not care.* Rather, she foregrounded her assertion of care for her community as being grounded in the union's self-determined demands: homes, jobs, water, and a seat at the table. This kind of nuance—care, if you will—in how and when she labelled something as "care" reflects a particular definition of the term that's more in line with the description from Liberatory Harm Reduction in the previous section than it is with the often-paternalistic approach to "providing services" or, worse, "charity," propagated by the large housing and shelter nonprofits competing for city funding. When Livingston invoked *care,* it was in the context of both 1) honoring people's inherent right to self-determination ("a seat at the table") and 2) addressing root causes of harm, rather than just symptoms (e.g., lack of homes, lack of jobs). Otherwise, what you get is "shelters that feel more like prisons," which is how Qadhafi spoke of city and NGO approaches to "care" for the homeless (Stoica, "Kansas City Homeless").

In this way, Livingston made care into something closer to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called "non-reformist reforms"—changes to a carceral system that take power away from that system and return it to the people most impacted by that system (INCITE!; Rodríguez). For example, while decriminalization of recreational drug use does not undo policing or prisons, it does limit the scope of police power over people's lives—a non-reformist reform; body cameras, on the other hand, end up bolstering police officers' ability to maintain control of the narrative, returning no narrative authority to those whom they police—a reformist reform. Differentiating between reformist and non-reformist reforms is a kind of literacy—one that's often overlooked in abolitionist movement spaces. We see a slippage between these two concepts in corners of abolitionist movements ranging from debates about body cameras as police reform (*NLG Statement*), to fights for the kinds of diversity, equity, and inclusion that serve more to bolster the reputation of an institution than to address systemic injustice (Ahmed), to movements for prison diversion programs that serve to expand home arrest—which simply makes one's home their prison—instead of actually keeping people out of the carceral net (Schenwar and Law). Here, Livingston's precise definition of care might help us, too, ensure that the kinds of *care* we hold as central to

the conversations and frameworks we develop in our movements are actually serving liberatory ends.

Finally, one of the things Livingston and I talked most frequently about—in interviews and in conversations as friends—was her plan for transitional housing. While she never saw this realized, her description of it offers a clear vision for what liberatory care as a literacy practice leading to systemic policy might look like:

> [I want a] transitional living plan that wasn't this rigid schedule, with indoctrination of, you know, some . . . religion . . . no strings attached, low to no barrier. Let's them get in . . . transitional housing, give them some time to rest. Because when I got housed, I slept for the first week, because you're not used to being safe. So that's what I'm basically doing; I'm trying to create this transitional living plan that has full on wraparound services, like genuine, total wraparound services, that will encompass all areas of their life to help them get them on their feet.
> And then when they're ready, then get them housed. That's gonna be a different timeline for everybody. You know what I'm saying? Some people are only going to need to be there for two weeks or something like that, you know, and then it's just a matter of getting housing, you know. Other people, maybe they've been out [on the streets] for their whole lives or something like that. They can take up to a year, maybe two years, however long, you know, to get them where they're ready, and they want to live on their own. So transitional housing for everybody will make a difference. So that's how I'm advocating. (Livingston, July 7)

When city leaders talk about homelessness, the conversation is around services and, to a lesser extent, access to care more broadly than the social. But services or care *to* or *for* isn't what homeless people have asked for; the demand for housing-first approaches is, in part, a demand that care be something homeless people can access on their own terms (e.g., when "they *want* to live on their own" [Livingston, July 7, emphasis mine]).

This is where care proves to be a literacy practice in addition to a material one. Livingston was crystal clear throughout her work that some things *aren't* care even if they're labelled as such—and some things that are shamed, criminalized, or otherwise devalued are the core of what care means. Differentiating between paternalistic, neoliberal, or carceral models of care and liberatory ones grounded in self-determination and interdependence became, then, a way of reading the world—a literacy practice that Livingston enacted and tried to build in others as part of her work. While her conceptualization of care arises from her specific context, this kind of critical reading of what gets labelled as *care* should be as integral to abolitionist literacy practices as our critical readings of "police reform vs. police abolition," and for the same reason—because the ever-expanding net of carcerality too frequently disguises itself as "reform" or "care" (Schenwar and Law).

Conclusion

> "From a place of superhuman resilience, through all the twists and turns of her life, Lulu remained hopeful and focused. . . . May we all channel some of Lulu's scrappiness, ambition, and perseverance. Long live Lulu Livingston, at your service."
> —KC Tenants, Instagram post, January 31, 2025

In the wake of Livingston's death, the homeless community and their housed allies returned to this one call: that her work was our work now. We had all worked alongside her, watched how she moved through the world, watched how she cared for people. When everyone else got tired, Lu Lu was still there. When homeless organizers needed resources, she was the one coordinating ways of getting them. In an obituary in the *Kansas City Star,* for example, Ken Simard is quoted as saying: "'On January 13, 2023, Lulu saved my life. . . . I was released from the hospital with nowhere to go except to my camp, where I would have likely been dead. . . . There was no way I would have been able to clean my wound. . . . She kept it clean for me'" (qtd. in Calfee). Comments sections on memorial articles and posts about her were all similar—story after story about how she lived out what she said she believed, however imperfectly, to the very end.

In one obituary, Qadhafi calls her a "mother hen," and this metaphor of motherhood, too, pops up throughout the memorials to her (Plake). She cared for people's wounds and fed them, but she also held movements together when every internal and external force seemed determined to pull them apart. When activists had falling outs and stopped speaking, she pieced relationships back together, telling us, gently (and sometimes not so gently), to get over ourselves. She was kind, but she also fiercely advocated for her community in spaces of power when she could and helped the next person she saw in the in-between—all the way to her last breath.

And now you've met her as best as you ever will, and you've heard her speak, and you've learned about her work, and now her work is your work, too. Do it well.

Livestreams and Media Coverage—Timeline

Throughout this article, I cite several livestream interviews and other media coverage of the Kansas City Homeless Union. These correlate to the timeline below, which offers an interactive picture of the Kansas City Homeless Union's work with Livingston's public interviews attached to it.

View the interactive timeline online.

Notes

[1] In my consent forms for interviews for the broader study from which this paper is drawn, I asked everyone to tell me how they wanted me to introduce them. Livingston said, "A white woman in my 40s with mental illness and determination, leader and organizer of the KCHU." We'll learn more about KCHU later in this paper.

[2] I've been asked by activists with lived experience of homelessness to emphasize, here, that Sixx was sober when he died. The stereotype that these kinds of deaths are addiction-related is pervasive and functions as a way for city leaders to shift blame from structural oppression and failure onto addiction, which is framed (incorrectly) as an individual failing.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, quotes come from two in-depth interviews I did with Livingston in summer 2022, when I was collecting data for what was then my dissertation and has since been expanded into my ongoing book project.

[4] The research interviews for this project were done in 2022 under the University of Kansas, IRB #STUDY00148813. The second phase of research has been completed under the University of Alabama, IRB #24-04-7524.

[5] A common protest chant directed at police in the Summer 2020 George Floyd uprisings against police brutality.

[6] For example, Livingston once told me about an interview with the *Kansas City Star* which she felt deeply uncomfortable doing—but did anyway because, in her mind, *someone had to* if the narrative was going to change.

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Review of *Abolitionist Intimacies: Queer and Trans Migrants Against the Deportation State* by Eithne Luibhéid

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In March 2025, media coverage turned to Andry Hernández Romero, more commonly known as the "gay makeup artist," who was deported to El Salvador's mega-prison. In the events that shaped the aftermath of Hernández Romero's detention, what became notable was the reaction from social media users and activists. Some worried over his safety, questioning whether he was alive, while others called out how Andry was not, as the state was alleging, a violent gang member. Whether these social media users and activists identified as LGBTQ+ or not, they managed to practice a form of queer resistance as they expressed solidarity with Andry. They recognized the dangers prisons pose for queer people of color and contested the nation-state's narratives of criminality. At a time when literacy practices of resistance remain vital for the well-being of those most targeted by the nation-state, it is this form of queer resistance—one that stands against the increasing powers of policing and incarceration—that brings a sense of hope for the futures of empathy, care, and justice. And it is this particular hope that resonates across Eithne Luibhéid's *Abolitionist Intimacies: Queer and Trans Migrants Against the Deportation State*.

Although situated outside of literacy studies, Luibhéid draws on public writings by and about queer and trans migrants to trace how abolition is practiced in response to exigencies brought on by the nation-state's deportations. Offering a framework for an abolitionist reading of these writings, Luibhéid considers how queer and trans migrants build relationships, or what she formally calls "intimacies," with their audiences to contest the deportation state's infrastructure. In particular, she explores how these queer intimacies challenge the "individuals, institutions, discourses, laws, policies, practices, built environments, and funding streams" (Luibhéid 5) that coalesce to dehumanize, displace, and confine undocumented people of color. For Luibhéid, centering the intimacies queer and trans migrants foster is important because they stand against the state-sanctioned intimacies that enable deportation. In highlighting the significance of these queer-driven intimacies, Luibhéid organizes her book around four case studies that illustrate what becomes possible when queer migrants, and their allies, shift the intimacies of their audiences away from the state's deportation logics and toward abolitionist practices.

In Chapter 1, "Pathways: Coproducing Citizenship and Deportation," Luibhéid examines the involvement of queer migrants in a group led by undocumented people that described themselves as a blue-ribbon commission. Consisting of individuals who were the most affected by immigration policymaking, this group organized to

have undocumented and formerly undocumented people share their expertise and offer a more human-centered approach to US migration policy. Luibhéid explains that this commission sought to challenge commonly proposed immigration reforms that increased the deportability of people of color and fostered "white, settler colonial, heteronormative, and capitalist relations" (48). Analyzing a report wherein the commission addressed then-President Obama and demanded an end to migration-control policies that increased state violence, Luibhéid examines how the group queered pathways to citizenship by advocating for the well-being of undocumented people, the preservation of communities, and the end to as many deportations as possible. By putting the demands of the commission into the foreground, Luibhéid draws significant attention to the policies and ways of life that become imaginable when the intimacies of undocumented people and their communities are foregrounded over the impulses to punish. And it is the close attention to these practices that makes Luibhéid's work relevant to literacy scholars interested in studying alternatives to state-sponsored literacies—literacies that, in spite of their promises, do not fully guarantee incorporation into the citizenry (Cavallaro; Shelledy; Vieira; Wan).

The attention to these queered practices remains one of the book's many strengths. And part of that strength is Luibhéid's situating of these practices as a response to the inequalities embedded in common pathways to citizenship. For example, Chapter 2, "Love, Marriage, and Deportation," looks at marriage and its involvement in deportation practices. Analyzing federal laws and immigration policies, Luibhéid describes how immigration officials deploy a heteronormative definition of love that disproportionately affects queer marriages between undocumented spouses and people of color. Because these marriages have queer, undocumented, and racialized components to them, the people in them face questioning and other barriers, such as encounters with law enforcement, that subject them to what Luibhéid describes as the "moral and penal logics within which practices of detention and deportation [have] flourished" (57). Thus, Luibhéid adds crucial context as to why queer and trans migrants see marriage as insufficient in anti-deportation efforts and instead decide to advocate for "collective action grounded in visions of radical love" and community (77).

Reminders of how queer and trans migrants practice abolition through community-building never get lost in Luibhéid's work. In Chapter 3, "Driving While Undocumented: Circulating Fear and Fearlessness," Luibhéid highlights how queer and trans migrants utilize community-building to challenge the insertion of immigration enforcement into everyday life. Luibhéid, more notably, cites how the state inflicts racist terror through traffic stops to further "attrition practices [that] not only target everyday activities in an effort to make life unlivable but also foster fear" (80). However, this racist policing can falter, especially when met with the queered practices of community-building. This is demonstrated by Luibhéid's analysis of undocumented activists who refused to be intimidated and, instead, mobilized a queer-inspired "coming out" campaign through the UndocuBus project. Luibhéid explains that the UndocuBus project allowed over 40 undocumented people to ride a bus from Arizona to the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. Noting how the side of the bus said "Sin Papeles Sin Miedo: No Papers No Fear," Luibhéid describes how the UndocuBus allowed undocumented

people to "circulate 'undocumented and unafraid' as a framework to build networks, intimacies, and demands for change" (81). It was this campaign that allowed activists to build, and garner support from, a national audience that had a chance to hear about undocumented people outside of the state-sponsored discourses that criminalize them. Such an analysis harkens back to Karma Chávez's work, which explores how the rhetorical practices of queer people and migrants coalesce in disrupting the silence that state power expects from those it seeks to oppress. Luibhéid's work can help scholars think through the ways that queer and migrant rhetorical practices not only coalesce in style, but also in their abolitionist aims.

One of the reasons why Luibhéid's work is a valuable resource for exploring abolitionist practices is because it significantly considers the interconnections between race and incarceration. This is evident in Chapter 4, "Cities as Chokepoints and Resistance," where Luibhéid describes the protests that organizers led against the city of Santa Ana and its plans to expand a LGBT pod for detained migrants. Luibhéid examines how organizers called out the city's loyalty to profits over the well-being of its constituents, most of whom were people of color. These organizers managed to point out how the expansion of the pod meant the increased detention of LGBT people and the continuous racial profiling of constituents by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). By focusing on the messaging of these organizers, Luibhéid demonstrates that abolition could be mobilized in campaigns that seek to restructure relationships between city officials and their constituents of color. For those looking to bridge community literacy with abolition, Luibhéid's analysis can be of great assistance, especially when viewed alongside Glenn Hutchinson's work. Also focusing on anti-deportation efforts, but more so around the work of student immigrant rights organizers, Hutchinson resists a community writing model that seeks to teach students how to become "active citizens," and instead argues for a pedagogical shift that "acknowledge[s] the rich rhetorical skills that many students possess in challenging racist, neoliberal policies" (Hutchinson 39). Both Luibhéid and Hutchinson present works that illuminate how anti-neoliberal practices are very much alive in our communities, reminding us of the important first step of listening when doing community-engaged work.

As I reflect on Luibhéid's work as a whole, I find that one of its many significant achievements is the balance that it strikes between hope and urgency. Luibhéid successfully illustrates how queer and trans migrants, along with their allies, work to overturn the intimacies that the nation-state sponsors, while also emphasizing that these intimacies continue to be embedded in our everyday lives. It is through this balance that I see Luibhéid echoing Amy Wan's call for literacy educators to "deliberate on the habits of citizenship that are being cultivated through our actions so that we may respond more effectively to current and continuing changes in the concept and reality of citizenship" (178). The precarious state of citizenship that Wan reminds us of could not be felt more today in the militarization of American cities, the criminalization and brutalization of protestors, and the racial profiling of individuals for the purposes of deportation and/or incarceration. As the deportation state grows more powerful, every part of American life, including academia, is being pressured to embrace indifference over empathy. It is no coincidence that in recent years there have been institutional

demands for academics to self-censor, distance themselves from human-centered work, and embrace artificial intelligence in their pedagogies—all practices that contribute to the deportation infrastructure that Luibhéid discusses. As literacy scholars grappling with these exigencies, Luibhéid's work provides a framework that invites us to question the intimacies we may be building with the nation-state, both in our personal lives and through our teaching, research, and service. And, equally as important, it provides a framework that invites us to imagine what is possible when we deviate from ever-shifting norms and build intimacies with those most targeted by the nation-state.

Works Cited

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