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LiCS MISSION STATEMENT

Literacy in Composition Studies is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords because they do particular kinds of work. We want to retain Composition's complicated history as well as FYC's institutional location and articulation to secondary education. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted. We are committed to publishing scholarship that explores literacy at its intersection with Composition's history, pedagogies, and interdisciplinary methods of inquiry.

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

LiCS seeks submissions that interpret literacy at a time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation. We are open to a wide range of research that takes up these issues, and we are especially interested in work that:

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

Editors' Introduction to Issue 3.2

While taking disparate approaches to researching and conceptualizing literacy, the authors in this issue demonstrate the struggle—for the individual, among a peer group, during a historical crisis—of embodied actors. Clay Walker develops a theory of literate agency called discursive readiness potential; Faith Kurtyka presents a sorority girl's acts of literacy as gendered acts of leadership; and Kirk Branch reconstructs the nineteenth-century congressional debate on the literacy test, highlighting how, despite the debate's transparency, positive associations about literacy enabled "the greatest political swindle in American history."

In "Composing Agency: Theorizing the Readiness Potentials of Literacy Practices," Clay Walker draws on research in embodied cognition and neuroscience to theorize how previous literate experiences emerge as potentials for action, a phenomenon he names "discursive readiness potential." Walker describes discursive readiness potential as "a discursive muscle memory" that "involves revising our connections among mind, body, and world"; it thus challenges the ideological model of literacy by acknowledging the role cognitive, embodied, and material practices play in literacy events. Approaching literate activity in terms of discursive readiness potential also has several implications for composition theory and pedagogy. By suggesting that metacognitive activities allow writers opportunities to practice and generate strategies and processes they can draw on in new situations, this article adds to the possibilities for facilitating transfer. It also challenges the skepticism of sentence-level pedagogies, suggesting that such pedagogies cultivate the "practice of practice" involved in discursive readiness potential.

In our second article, "'Get Excited People!': Gendered Acts of Literacy in a Social Sorority," Faith Kurtyka answers the call for "broader, deeper" research on women's rhetoric by studying a sorority as a pre-professional group. Utilizing third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, Kurtyka traces how the rhetorical strategies "Polly" uses allow her to try on different leadership identities and tactics while balancing the emotional labor and gendered expectations of her management role. Kurtyka codes rhetorical patterns within the sorority e-mails and discourse-based interviews with Polly. From identifying rhetorical strategies ranging from silly humor to "nudges of encouragement" in the sorority communications, Kurtyka paints a picture of situated literate action. Combined with an analysis of Polly's use of rhetorical strategies over time, Kurtyka's essay demonstrates the gendered decisions at play as a writer composes "documents that balance a tension between the personal and the organizational" (39), ultimately arguing that opportunities for such experimentation and negotiation may serve women as helpful stepping stones toward successful leadership in other rhetorical situations.

Kirk Branch's "'A Mockery in the Name of a Barrier': Literacy Test Debates in the Reconstruction-Era Congress, 1864-1869" examines nineteenth-century congressional discourse about literacy as a prerequisite for voting rights. Through his analysis of the congressional debates that eventually led to the Fifteenth Amendment, Branch demonstrates that by exploiting the "beneficent glow" associated with literacy, enemies of African-American male suffrage were able to obscure their racist intentions with the positive connotations of literacy. Branch argues that even though it was always evident, even

within congressional debates, that literacy tests would be used as a way to specifically disfranchise African Americans, the tests' long political life is a testament to the power of literacy's associations. Literacy provided a way to talk about the problem of enfranchised freedmen without resorting to racial categories that was difficult to contest, even though all were aware of the consequences.

We close the issue with a book review and a continuation of our ongoing symposium. Rebecca Kling's Symposium contribution "Ante Up: Econocide and the Literacy Game in U.S. Prisons" draws on the author's personal experience as a prison research assistant to demonstrate how collaboration, reflection, and resource allocation are of central concern to composition in both the university and the penal system. Drawing on Wilkey and Cleary's article, "(Un)rigging the Literacy Game: Political Literacies that Challenge Econocide," Kling challenges teachers and students alike to move "beyond one's own narrative as a means of empowerment." Stephanie Rae Larson's review of *Reimagining Process: Online Writing Archives and the Future of Writing Studies* rounds out the issue by providing a critical take on Kyle Jensen's reassessment of process pedagogy and theory vis-a-vis materialism.

Appearing between our last special issue on *Community Literacies and The New Activism* and our upcoming special issue this fall, entitled *The Transnational Movement of People and Information* (guest edited by Kate Vieira, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, and Morris Young), this issue's pieces continue to move our understanding of embodiment and embodied actors forward. We hope readers enjoy this bonus issue as much as we did

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Justin Lewis, *University of Nevada, Reno*
Tara Lockhart, *San Francisco State University*
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Composing Agency: Theorizing the Readiness Potentials of Literacy Practices

Clay Walker Wayne State University

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that literacy actors compose agency through the embodied practice of literacies in combination with self-aware feedback loops. The argument brings together recent conversations on agency, embodiment, and cognition in composition studies, neuroscience, and the humanities to develop the concept of discursive readiness potential. Discursive readiness potential refers to one's embodied agency and accounts for the range of possible actions available to an actor on the basis of her or his past experiences. Furthermore, discursive readiness potential points to one's capacity to navigate a field of potential literate practices into one actualized action. As such, the essay supports a renewed call for research on agency and embodied cognition in composition studies by outlining discursive readiness potential as a flexible process model for understanding how agents act in emergent discursive situations.

KEYWORDS

agency; embodiment; embodied cognition; potentiality; literacy

The ideological model, as part of the social turn in composition, consists of ethnographic research analyzing literacies in the context of broader social, cultural, and political currents of power and aims to understand how those practices were constructed through ideology. As Brian Street summarizes the approach, literacy is "a social practice" that is "always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological'" (418). Since the 1980s, the ideological model has been the dominant paradigm through which researchers have investigated literate practices, resulting in countless ethnographies detailing socially situated literacies.

Recent critiques of the ideological model note that mainstream literacy studies has done little to respond to the mounting evidence that our cognition and corporeality are profoundly intertwined and shaped by our material environments. As Marolina Salvatori argues, we should do more to critique the ideological model, including our notions of "literacy," and account for the material *acts* of reading and writing (67). Moreover, in her recent critique of the social turn, Laura Micciche argues that social constructivism—as one of our "central explanatory systems of writing communication" —is insufficiently tooled to "match the creative complexities of our time" ("Writing Material" 497), and its primary analytical tools (e.g., textual analysis and ideological analysis) "are limited" in their ability to deal with the ecological relations between texts, bodies, and worlds (488). Likewise, Kristie Fleckenstein argues it is time that we return to cognitivist views of composition, informed now by our understanding of the dynamic and formative roles played by bodies and ecologies of writing.[2] These arguments dovetail with other critiques of literacy studies, such as those by James Collins and Richard Blot, who argue for more attention to micro-power in literacies, and by Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton, who argue we should attend to nonhuman actors in literacy scenes. This scholarship suggests that we need new approaches to grapple with how, as Raúl Sánchez puts it, the (f)act of literacy is inexorably embroiled in ecologies of mind, body, and world.

The problem facing our field isn't about how socio-cultural power or ideology shapes human literate activity, but about how we conceptualize human (corporeal) bodies doing literacy as an ideologically and socio-culturally hued *and* materially embodied and embedded cognitive practice. Critiques of the ideological model emphasize that writing is deeply tied to (with) our bodies, tools, and technologies as we navigate ideologically charged socio-cultural situations, for as Micciche writes, "Writing involves everything you do, everything you encounter, everything you are when making sense of the world through language. Writing is contaminated, made possible by a mingling of forces and energies in diverse, often distributed environments. Writing is defined, ultimately, by its radical withness" ("Writing Material" 502). Writing is with (inseparable from) not only ideologically hued cultural practices, but also nonrepresentational aspects of embodiment and the various tools, technologies, and other nonhuman actors that extend our embodied acts of writing into contested social spaces.

This essay examines embodiment as an aspect of literacy practice. Following Lisa Blackman, I understand embodiment as a nonrepresentational process, as something that we *do* and *become* rather than something that we *have* or *are*. By focusing on embodiment as a process through which we compose a certain kind of body connected to and extended by other bodies, tools, technologies, etc., we can better see how cognition and cognitive actions are deeply intertwined with our bodies and our worlds (Blackman). Examining embodied practices in this way affords a focus on agency via the concept of discursive readiness potential, which accounts for how one's previous literate experiences emerge as potentials for action in a situation, and how cultivating and changing our sets of emergent potentials involves revising our connections among mind, body, and world.[3]

We can conceptualize discursive readiness potential as a discursive muscle memory. Our manifold capacities to act emerge from prior practice as possible ways of *doing* in a literacy scene, but are subsequently winnowed down by conscious and nonconscious processes into a single action.

The concept responds to Kate Vieira's argument for the field to ask "what are the consequences of literacy" (26), for "literacy is a tool (though not a neutral one) that has particular potentials to be put to certain uses" (27). Discursive readiness potential offers a theoretical approach for outlining such potentialities *as* potentialities in realtime. Discursive readiness potential encapsulates what Steve Parks terms the range of resting points (conceived here as the recurring vantage points for action) that continually emerge as our literate practices unfurl in space and time. Readiness potential is bound to socialized discourse processes yet underscores the importance of the cognitive, embodied, and material practices and forces that shape our actions in the present.

To illustrate discursive readiness potential, I offer a brief anecdote from my own writing practices as a burgeoning academic. While I was in the midst of completing my PhD coursework, I had proposed an ambitious conference paper that would require substantial work to complete. However, when the conference neared, I found myself struggling to balance teaching several sections of composition at multiple institutions; and in the week leading up to the conference, I found myself caring for my two young children alone. These circumstances, and the responsibilities they entailed, blocked my own perception as I struggled with my talk. I had only given a couple other conference papers at this stage, so the scene was still mystified for me. I felt unaware of the unwritten rules that govern academic conferences, unsure of my status as a graduate student (feeling like much of an outsider), and uncertain about what kinds of discursive moves were allowed or available to me. The conference paper seemed so very different from the kinds of writing I had done as an undergraduate (and as a graduate student) at the time.

To understate my felt experience, I was overwhelmed, and I felt hemmed in by the limits of my experience, the conference paper rhetorical situation, and the specific genre conventions of the conference paper.[4] As the conference drew near, I could not move past my felt sense of the argument I wanted to make. As Sondra Perl writes, felt sense emerges as "images, words, ideas, and vague fuzzy feelings that are anchored in the writer's body. What is elicited, then, is not solely the product of a mind but of a mind alive in a living, sensing body," and when writers return to felt sense, they are "looking to their felt experience, and waiting for an image, a word, or a phrase to emerge that captures the sense they embody" (365).[5] I didn't know how to materialize those hazy ideas into a coherent paper, and I could only imagine *not* giving the talk, sitting on the bench until I had acquired whatever skills I would need for the next round, for the task of writing the paper seemed too cognitively taxing to manage. While I was attempting to reproduce a conventionalized genre, it was one of the first times I had attempted to iterate the gestures that comprise a conference paper, and I could see no inroads for articulating my ideas in a way that could count as a conference paper.

The problem I faced was one of genre uptake, which as Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff explain is a kind of conditional knowledge about how and when to use a genre that is "often tacitly acquired, ideologically consequential, deeply remembered and affective, and quite durable, connected not only to memories of prior, habitual responses to a genre, but also memories of prior engagements with other, related genres" (86). We can also see this as an issue of agency, understood as our capacity to act or to affect others and be affected, for as Bawarshi argues, genres invite certain meaning potentials, including opportunities to (re)produce the norms and subjectivities of a genre's

discourse community.[6] This essay develops discursive readiness potential as an embodied aspect of the agent that emerges from one's experience and situatedness. Discursive readiness potential situates agency as an everyday function of embodied actors that emerges from our prior experience as much as our unfolding situation (viewed from the tripartite dynamic relationships between mind, body, and world), and it marks agency as the process of navigating potential actions in discursive situations through feedback loops that tie together our minds, bodies, and material ecologies.

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In the following sections, I bring together current views on agency and embodiment from interdisciplinary scholarship on affect, embodiment, and neuroscience with the goal of outlining a more robust theory of agency for literacy studies. As recent composition scholars have argued (Cooper, "Being Linked" and "Rhetorical Agency"; Fleckenstein; Gorzelsky; Micciche), writing and literacy are simultaneously cultural and biological undertakings that are underwritten by feedback and feedforward loops between our bodies and the material worlds we write in. As such, we may best theorize aspects of literacy if we develop frameworks that account for the interrelationships between material, embodied, and neurobiological aspects of literacies. My approach follows Edward Slingerland's argument that the humanities should integrate what we know about embodied cognition from the biological societies with our well-established capacities to analyze cultural nuance in the humanities, else we risk developing misguided theories of literacy, cognition, and action grounded in factual error (27).[7]

ACTION POTENTIALS AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

This section frames the essay's argument by examining a constellation of concerns regarding action potentials and embodied experience in discursive situations. First, I discuss materialist and embodied approaches to potentials for action, a frame that underlies the rest of the article, then I tie these concepts to literacy studies by way of Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt's ethnography of embodied action.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has framed embodiment as one's capacity to do something, recursively wrapped up in the interconnections between our minds and bodies, as well as other bodies, tools, and technologies that fill the worlds we inhabit (Blackman; Brennan; Clark; Clough; Damasio). Embodiment and embodied cognition are things that we do, not things that happen to us (Blackman; Clark; Latour; Maturana and Varela; Noë; Slingerland). Accordingly, our bodies are not stable (or passive) entities through which we act, but are always in the process of becoming, mediated by internal processes (i.e., affects, feelings, emotions, goals, memories) and

external forces that affect us (Blackman; Cooper, "Rhetorical"; Thompson). For example, social scientist Nigel Thrift ascribes for the body a potential for becoming, for entering new socio-political territories, for becoming certain *whos* doing certain *whats* as events unfold, and he situates this potentiality as an emergent process of action.[8] Thrift develops the term "bare life," which he describes as "that little space of time that is much of what we are, a space not so much at the edge of action as lighting the world" (60), and as "that blink between action and performance in which the world is pre-set by biological and cultural instincts which bear both extraordinary genealogical freight—and a potential for potentiality" (61). Bare life, in other words, describes the liminal space between cognition and doing where potentiality resides; potentiality describes the range of possible actions available to an individual hemmed in by biological capacities, prior cultural practices and experiences, and other nonrepresentational forces, such as emotions, affects, etc.

This essay explores potentiality in order to understand how experience feeds into agency. How does a body's capacities to act (to affect and be affected) emerge from a field of potentials (possible actions not yet actualized) conditioned by the body's ideologically hued socialized history and by its relations with human and nonhuman actors? Each action emerges in dynamic response to our ongoing and emergent interactions between other human and nonhuman actors in a situation, including our own textuality. Each literacy event is a resting point, one stance in the world among a dynamic field of literate practices and possibilities that "rises out of the layerings and interleavings of body practices and things" (Thrift 63). In order to conceptualize literacy as an emergent stance arising out of the interleavings of bodies, practices, and things, I turn to Leander and Boldt's discussion of emergence and action, which like other recent work on emergence or becoming (Cooper, "Rhetorical"; Lu and Horner; Rickert; Syverson) emphasizes how our capacities to *do* are shaped by the "brain-body-thing-world circuits" that comprise our embodied and emplaced situatedness as literate agents (Rickert 92).

In "Rereading 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,'" Leander and Boldt move away from the text-centrism of the New London Group (NLG) by drawing a nonrepresentational framework from Giles Deleuze and Massumi to argue that literate practices are tied to embodiment. The NLG situates texts at the center of literate practice while also viewing texts as the outcome of practice (28). In contrast, Leander and Boldt focus on the concept of emergence (i.e., activity unfolding out of the dynamic and cyclical relationship between an individual and her surround) to highlight texts as things that are produced in process that feedback into new assemblages, thus becoming actants in practice.

Each literacy practice, as it unfolds, emerges out of internal states like goals, intents, feelings, etc., but also by the various human-nonhuman assemblages circulating in the literacy event.[9] Leander and Boldt illustrate this principle of emergence through an evocative retelling of a scene in which one boy, Lee, engaged in a range of literate activities related to a Manga comic character. By shifting literacy analyses away from text-centrism and toward embodiment, where the body is conceptualized not as a solitary thing (what cognitive scientist Andy Clark calls the skin-bag) but as an assemblage of the mind, body, and various objects, tools, and technologies (i.e., mind-body-world assemblages), then we can begin to conceptualize how embodied literate activities unfold in unpredictable ways (i.e., untethered from deterministic text-centric outcomes). The material objects that extend Lee's body include books, headbands, and toy daggers, as well as chairs, porches, and kitchen tables. Each item

affords the unfolding of certain practices; each practice becomes part of the literacy event, opening up new possibilities for action while foreclosing others. For example, reading the Manga outside with the toy daggers and other accessories scattered about quickly shifted to play fighting echoing the characters and scenes from the text. The reading practice, as much as the toys and other environmental features, co-constituted the potential for enacting play fighting resonant with the text's narrative events.

Leander and Boldt highlight the nexus between *embodied* human and nonhuman actors through the concepts of emergence and nonrepresentational thinking, which allow us to see Lee as an ever-changing assemblage of mind, body, and material things. A nonrepresentational approach does not view activity as the determinate outcome of prior practice, but as an unpredictable outcome contingent on the multiple and co-existing relationships and assemblages between human and nonhuman actors (36). Further, Leander and Boldt argue, the repetition of practice is deeply tied to the different ways a body is emplaced in an environment, for each reiteration emerges in its own unique context across a non-sequential timeframe (37). This opens a space for indeterminacy, for "[i]t is the body's registration of the difference between what is and what could be, the potential for emergence, connecting moment to moment, movement to movement" (40). Each iteration is its own emergence, its own potential for action, and each stance in the world consists of its own conditions of emergence and potentials for action. Our conceptual tools for addressing the networks of human and nonhuman actors must address how the kinds of agency that emerge in a situation are shaped by an actively thinking and sensing body in dynamic interrelationships with its surrounding materiality.

NAVIGATING POTENTIALS FOR ACTION

Composition studies has problematically neglected the issue of agency since the rise of poststructuralist theory (Cooper, "Rhetorical Agency"). With the rise of poststructuralist critiques of subjectivity, our theories of language and action placed broad social constructs like discourse and ideology in the author's chair as we turned away from process views of cognition and agency (Flower). Scholarship in literacy and composition studies has focused on socially constructed discourses as the engine of individual action (our ways with words) in rhetorical situations, while agency has been reserved as a marker for either acts of resistance against dominant forms of power or as a lack of discourse mastery (Lu and Horner). Recent conversations on agency (e.g., Cooper "Rhetorical Agency"; Lu and Horner), however, emphasize embodiment as a key framework for understanding agency as we move forward. The following section discusses this scholarship to define agency as an embodied capacity for navigating possible actions that emerge from the reiterative practice of literacies.

Critiques of the poststructuralist erasure of the agent (i.e., the death of the author) have argued that conceptions of rhetoric as an individual undertaking do not work without some functional theory of agency (Cooper "Rhetorical Agency"). For example, in her recent review of literacy studies scholarship on affect and agency, Beth Daniell points out that James Gee's Discourse theory, which conceptualizes social languages as Discourses that are comprised of our ways of saying-being-doing-feeling and allow us to be recognized as certain *whos* doing certain *whats,* cannot account for

individual agency. As Daniell explains, while Gee makes distinctions between the primary Discourses we acquire at home and the secondary Discourses we learn in public spaces and institutions, he does not fully explain how individuals navigate multiple Discourses in realtime, sometimes forging hybrid Discourses to deal with complex rhetorical situations. As Daniell points out, since Gee argues one cannot fully engage with a Discourse until one has acquired fluidity and control (mastery), he leaves little room for personal agency outside of Discourse.

In "Agency and the Death of the Author," John Trimbur articulates a notion of agency that contrasts with agency as mastery and control, for as Trimbur writes, "agency is not about explaining but about maneuvering, […] not the theory but the *practice* of practice" (287). Agency is not a matter of theories, explanations, interpretations, discourses, but is instead about action, movements, flows, strategies, tactics, maneuverings, the *practice* of practice. The repeated, culturally situated, embodied practices that get enacted time and again must be navigated by the individual, and this capacity to maneuver between various possible consequential actions is a kind of agency rooted in the everyday moments of being literate. Trimbur's concept of agency buttresses my concept of discursive readiness potential, as it brings together conversations on agency and embodiment.[10]

Trimbur marks agency not as the result of a deliberate interpretation, but as a structure of feeling, or the affective presentation of embodied experience to the mind in a holistic yet nondiscursive process that we register as intensities or feelings that seem private, but are social phenomena experienced within the theater of the body and registered by the mind, just at the edge of semantic representation.[11] These structures of feeling are important because they shape the performance of an action, giving it contours and intensities that later get interpreted and linguistically represented by the mind. At the cusp of action, however, we only have these structures of feeling that are at once both intensely personal and thoroughly social. Agency is about excess and potentiality—capacities to act—rather than intentionality or determination (288). Trimbur writes that agency results from "our feelings about the possibilities of consequential action and how we recognize and justify what we do" (288). Understanding those feelings as well as the embodied cultural and material factors that (re)shape them is crucial to a project aiming to holistically understand agency and to view writing as an embodied act, which of course, it is.

Recent composition scholarship has taken up the cognitive sciences in order to discuss how human cognition *emerges* from the complex interrelationships between brain, body, and world (Cooper; Fleckenstein; Lu and Horner). As Marilyn Cooper explains in "Being Linked to the Matrix," writing is an embodied activity driven by ecological principles that tie writers and writing to tools, technology, and the world, with implications for how we think about agency. Cooper writes, writing is not an autonomous intentional action, but is "more like monitoring, nudging, adapting, adjusting—in short, responding to the world" (16), for although writing is a system that we've created through our social and embodied living, it also re-creates us through the various feedback loops that tie us to ourselves and the world around us (25). Cooper points to our emergent process of becoming through feedback loops between ourselves and our surround ("Rhetorical"). Likewise, Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner take up the concept of emergence, which they tie to agency in "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency." Finding that the field has limited its notions

of literacy to spatial concepts by construing literacies "in terms of insides and outsides, borders and margins" (587), Lu and Horner argue that this spatial view limits our understanding of "mainstream writer agency" to the transgression of cultural norms (584). In response, Lu and Horner argue that emergence emphasizes temporality, and all literate activities entail the (re)production of difference—even the literate activities that seem to reiterate cultural norms.

Lu and Horner argue that discursive agency emerges through continual acts of iteration and reiteration, decontextualization and recontextualization, modification and reproduction. Every discourse act is a moment of agency wherein one must navigate potentialities, for if every instance of language use modifies the language at the same time that it reproduces the language, "then every instance of the use of language, including what is recognized as repetition, represents an exercise of agency, a choice, whatever the level of consciousness in the making of it, and a contribution of sedimentation" (589). Every time we take discursive action, we practice agency as we actively (re)construct language and contribute to our own sedimentation. Every action is a (re)construction of the language forms available to the individual according to the situation, and each discourse act (re)contextualizes language from one spatio-temporal context to another through a cyclical emergent process that works as a feedback loop between individual embodied agents and their surround. Thus, writing is "emergent and relational, in a state of becoming, not only informing but also informed by how we negotiate—reconstruct, re-member, and reconfigure—identifications or 'knowledge' of 'the context' of our life and work and our practical senses of the relations and conditions most urgently requiring meaningful responses" (591). By emphasizing the "mutual interdependence of structure and language practices," Lu and Horner direct our attention to discursive agency, or the ways individuals "fashion and refashion standardized conventions, subjectivity, the world, and their relations to others and the world" time and again, without a presumption that the discourse agent is squarely located within a stable discourse world (591). Discourse conventions, subjectivities, and situations are not spatially out there, but are flung from the ever ongoing processes of doing literacy that emerge in unpredictable ways, shaped by one's embodied emplacement in situations carved out by one's (and others') actions.

To illustrate their argument, Lu and Horner discuss David Bartholomae's "White Shoes" example from "Inventing the University," which (for Bartholomae) demonstrates "the normative stability of discourse at the expense of both the writer's situation and the eventfulness of language itself" (Bartholomae, qtd. in Lu and Horner 593-94). However, Lu and Horner note that the essay "appears to iterate norms with a vengeance—to wallow in conventionality" (594), and in doing so, falls outside conventional notions of agency. In terms of (re)iterating dominant discourses, or (re)inventing the university, the essay appears to be unremarkable, but from a perspective of discursive agency as an emergent process through which writers always navigate difference-making, the essay raises questions about the agent's (re)iterations in relationship to a wider field of potential discourse actions. The essay demonstrates that the (re)iteration of conventional discourse moves emerges from a field of alternate possibilities. Of all the discursive moves available to the agent, why choose this one; or conversely, why not the others?

By acknowledging all discourse moves as agentic, Lu and Horner's translingual approach conceptualizes any (re)iteration of a discourse as a generative move that has meaning in contrast to

a field of other potential discourse actions. The practice of literate practices—each (re)iteration of a literate practice—affords consequences for the ways in which those literate practices, in dynamic interrelationships with other actors (human and nonhuman), compose our socio-cultural positions as subjects. As Cooper explains, writing is an embodied activity situated in environments replete with tools, technologies, and other bodies, and "the practices that are writing emerge as people respond to others and to their world; they are not the product of minds somehow separated from bodies nor of innate technical or linguistic abilities" (18). To understand writing from this biological and cultural perspective requires us to account for the ways writing activities are inexorably tied to complex networks of our bodies, and other bodies, tools, and nonhuman actors. Words and tools are ready-at-hand parts of our brain/body/world networks, and writing is always in emergent inter-action with our surrounds (19-20).

"Agency is a fluctuating sense of one's capacity to affect others and be affected that emerges from one's current goals, emotions, perceptions, ongoing recollections of memories, and dispositions within feedback and feedforward loops between ourselves and the world in which we act. This ecological view of agency emphasizes potentiality or unpredictability over intentionality. Agency understood from this perspective is the practice of navigating a range of possible literacy actions that emerge in a situation out of our dynamic interrelation to the conscious and nonconscious forces within the brain/body as well as the material nonhuman actors that press upon our situatedness."

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COMPOSING AGENCY

The previous section conceptualized agency as a capacity to navigate a field of potential actions shaped by the practice of literacy practices. This section explores how practices are sedimented through action and how we can compose new kinds of agencies by changing the range of potential actions that emerge in embodied situations. I build on agency as the practice of practice and the navigation of a field of possible emergent actions by turning to neuroscience (Schwartz and Begley) and the humanities (Noland). First, I take up cognitive psychologist Jeffry Schwartz's work with patients who have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), which shows how we may change our well-established patterns of behavior and, in doing so, make changes to our brain, mind, and body. Second, I draw on French scholar Carrie Noland's work on gestures and cognitive science, which

argues we compose agency by doing. Together, this scholarship emphasizes the importance of one's self-aware feedback in cultivating potentials for action.

Schwartz develops the notion of mental force to explain how the full effort of physiological and psychological attention that humans are capable of producing in any given situation may intervene in our emergent potentials for action. For instance, imagine the experience of driving on the freeway during a storm when visibility is reduced and the road has become slick and dangerous. When driving under dangerous conditions, the mind and body synergetically turn themselves to the task at hand (driving the car), producing the so-called white-knuckle effect. It is a moment of agency that is felt as much as thought-through; as we feel tension or anxiety, our eyes widen, and our conscious and nonconscious cognitive resources narrowly focus on the task at hand. Schwartz and Begley argue that all our actions share a certain capacity for deploying mental force and that this effort is key to changing the likelihood that any potential action will be actualized.

Schwartz and Begley turn to Benjamin Libet's study of action and awareness to develop this argument. In Libet's first set of experiments, he asked individuals to decide to flick or flex their wrist at a time of their choosing while wearing devices on their scalps that measure brain activity. Libet found in this first set of experiments that brain activity dramatically increased about one half-second prior to the movement of the wrist. The brain activity that fills this half-second, known as the readiness potential, was long thought to have been "related to the process of preparing to make a movement" (304), but Libet's research found that not all brain activity was followed by a motion. As Schwartz and Begley explain, "the readiness potential [that Libet] was detecting appeared too long before muscle activation to correspond directly with a motor command to the muscle" (304). The traditional view in neuroscience and psychology maintains that will or agency initiates action, and "this sense of volition would have to appear before the onset of readiness potential, or at worst coincidently with it" (305). However, Libet's research found that individuals' sense of agency emerged *after* the onset of readiness potential.

In Libet's second set of experiments, individuals were asked to flick their wrist at a time of their choosing, and to report the time at which they became aware of this decision. Following forty trials of five individuals in each trial, Libet found that the half-second readiness potential (which amounts to 550 milliseconds) preceded movement, yet "[a]wareness of the decision to act occurred about 100 to 200 milliseconds before the muscle moved," leaving 350 milliseconds of readiness potential prior to awareness of a decision to move. More recently, Soon, Brass, Heinze, and Haynes have found that readiness potential may emerge several seconds prior to awareness of action.

To understand agency, we must understand readiness potential, for agency exists not to initiate or invent an action but to narrow the field of potential actions by allowing and suppressing possible alternative actions. Schwartz and Begley explain, "[T]he prefrontal cortex [the brain region most directly tied to conscious cognitive thought] plays a central role in the seemingly free selection of behaviors, choosing from a number of possible actions by inhibiting all but one and focusing attention on the chosen one" (312). The power of agency lies in narrowing the field of potentiality, and if we want to effect change on an individual's capacity to act, we must work to strengthen the likelihood that a possible action will happen. Agency is thus the refusal to complete an action initiated

by one's nonconscious brain activity, a process that Schwartz and Begley call "free won't," or the "mind's veto power over brain-generated urges" (296). Longstanding habitual actions enjoy strong neural networks that reinforce the likelihood that we will continue to do those actions. Schwartz and Begley's concept of mental force allows us to articulate how writers can initiate a free won't agency through the practice of practice, thereby composing new potentials for action in future situations.

Because agency is a simultaneously nonconsious and conscious process, Schwartz and Begley counter the likely criticism that "[t]his may seem an enfeebled sort of free will, if [free will] does not initiate actions but only censors them. And yet the common notion of free will assumes the possibility of acting otherwise in the same circumstances, of choosing not to perform actions that tempt us each and every day" (308). Schwartz and Begley show that in order for a possible alternative action to enter into the process of choosing an action, it must be one that is felt to be available rather than experienced as just theoretical.

In Schwartz's research and therapy with OCD patients who, for example, repeatedly wash their hands, he found through brain scans that the OCD neural circuit that represents "go wash your hands" was tied to nonconscious and conscious areas of the brain and would fire repeatedly. The strength of the brain circuits corresponded with the intensity of the felt experience to do something. In therapy, patients were introduced to the idea that they could do something else at that moment: besides washing their hands, Schwartz suggested to his patients that they might go to the garden instead of the sink. However, the brain circuitry that represents "go to the garden" would enter into decision making processes in the prefrontal cortex as a much weaker signal early in therapy, thus having a lower probability of occurring. Schwartz demonstrates this claim through empirical evidence (pre- and post-treatment PET scans) that shows how the relative strength of key synaptic circuits changes as a result of patients' use of mental force to tend the garden instead of hand washing.

By exerting mental effort over time, the patient may change the balance of probabilities so that the potential action strengthens its associated neural signals and its likelihood for occurring. As Schwartz explains, in the circuit that represents "wash your hands" (as in any other circuit that represents a behavior such as "go to the garden"), the potentiality to both wash and don't wash co-exist. Early in the therapy, however, the brain "wave representing 'release neurotransmitter' in the OCD circuit [i.e., go wash hands] has a higher probability than the wave representing 'release neurotransmitter' in the garden circuit" resulting in the patient being "much more likely to go to the sink" (362-63). Notably, the brain activity corresponds to affectively charged experience registered as a felt imperative to wash hands despite conscious (theoretical) intent to do something other than the OCD behavior, such as go to the garden. However, as the "go to the garden" circuit gathers strength over time and through practice (i.e., the practice of practice), it becomes a felt possibility, and patients increasingly feel they have a choice. Once the alternative action becomes a felt possibility, "[t]he OCD patient can now act on this thought and go to the garden. This increases the chance that, in the future, the 'garden' circuit will prevail over the 'wash' circuit," for "If the patient regularly goes to the garden instead of the sink, neuroplasticity [the brain's ability to physically alter its structure] kicks in: brain metabolism changes in a way that strengthens the therapeutic circuit. As a result, future OCD urges are easier to overcome" and the OCD patient begins to gain control over his or her actions (363). Individuals

may change the likelihood that one action will take precedence over another through mental force and the practice of practice, sedimenting practiced actions as potentials in neural activation patterns.

Agency is a simultaneously physiological and psychological process that narrows a field of potential actions into a singular act and affords the capacity to intervene in the potentials that emerge. The field of potential actions emerges as non-conscious brain activity termed readiness potential. Potentiality refers to a set of actions available to us because of a specific history of practice, which may be altered through mental force. As Gorzelsky argues in "Literacy in a Biocultural World," literacy is an "inherently biocultural phenomena" (122). Schwartz and Begley's work provides a way to articulate both how literacy practices entail both biological and cultural practices that shape the literate actions available to us in a situation, and how we may change our emergent field of potentials for action.

Noland extends this argument in *Agency and Embodiment* by exploring how we "convey spontaneous, unscripted meanings through sedimented forms" or practices, such as gestures (56). Noland develops an embodied concept of agency in which embodiment is "the process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and 'lived' at the level of the body. *Agency*, it follows, is the power to alter those acquired behaviors and beliefs" for multiple purposes (9). At the heart of Noland's project is the argument that kinesthetic sense, or the capacity to recognize one's own body as different than others, is key to understanding agency.

Noland focuses on gestures because they highlight the nexus of embodiment and signification. Gestures, Noland explains, are "techniques of the body" that are learned through socialization, including ways of "sleeping, standing, running, dancing" or inscribing, and consist of "small or large muscle movements, consciously or unconsciously executed" (15-16). Noland's concept of gestures is akin to the kinds of saying-being-doing formations that underwrite Gee's notion of Discourse, for gestures are wrapped up in culturally formed routines that carry social signification and are performed at varying levels of conscious and nonconscious attention. As Noland explains, "Gesturing is the visible performance of a sensorimotor body that renders that body at once culturally legible (socially useful) and *interoceptively available to itself"* (21). Gestures render the body as socially useful (certain *whos* doing certain *whats*) while making the experience of that culturally inscribed movement available to the self as the structuring principle of the body. This process is an embodied agency, "a kinesis that parses anatomical possibilities into distinct gestures available for *but not equivalent to* social meanings" (Noland 54). One's sense of self enables one to cultivate embodied potentials for action into distinct socially useful or meaningful gestures that are not equivalent to social meanings because their significance is shaped by the situations in which they emerge. Gestures thus describe the sets of saying-being-doing-feeling practices that comprise Discourses, and through their practice or (re)iteration, feed their actualization or performance in the world back to the individual as a kind of self-awareness akin to Schwartz and Begley's mental force. Furthermore, the significance of these gestures is not fleshed out until they emerge in situations. This suggests we conceptualize practices as potentials for action that do not fall into Discourses (i.e., categories of signification) until they emerge in realtime; this process of emergence constitutes for Noland the moment in which we compose culture through doing.

The material body consists of emergent potentials for action that may be enacted to create culture;

and by activating or performing various gestures as culturally meaningful assemblages, we are writing the body as the body writes (213). Noland explains: "Like any element of a conventionalized language or procedure, gestures are iterable, but when performed *by me* they are not necessarily iterations. There is a first time for *my* body to perform what other bodies already have learned to do. And there is a first time for *my* body to perform the gesture in an idiosyncratic and potentially subversive way" (214). This principle of iteration resonates with Lu and Horner's emphasis on the (re)production of sameness as a moment of agency. While these kinds of actions may not be revolutionary, they are the crucial moments wherein one writes one's own body as one writes; inscribing culture into distinct bodily formations and assemblages that may re-emerge later as potentials for action in future literacy scenes.

Like Schwartz and Begley, Noland sees agency as a capacity to navigate actions and, in doing so, to (re)iterate actions in order to cultivate sedimented socio-cultural practices that can later emerge as potentials for action. The neural circuits underwriting habitual actions are composed by the reiteration of behaviors over time and may be revised or changed through future actions (74). When our sedimented routines of action do not fit an emergent situation, we undergo a "neural reorganization," in which "the system hesitates, searches among a 'myriad of possibilities,' multiple ways of creating new aggregates, connections, circuits, and eventually, behaviors" (Noland 74). To get through this conflict, Noland argues, we must draw on creativity that is "constrained by the kinetic dispositions and realized gestural routines (the 'embodied history') of the organism itself" —our library of I-cans (74-75). Because we have these neurally inscribed I-cans, we may respond to novel situations with flexibility and unpredictability while relying on socio-culturally sedimented behaviors or gestures. Noland writes,

> [O]ur body's incorporation of the social in the form of a body *hexis* (neural pathways inscribed through imitation and training) provides a sort of "library," a choice of responses, that we can draw from to "deviate" the given and "elude" the automatic. That which would, from another perspective, hem us in and potentially crush us (our social construction) instead contributes to forming an "embodied history" of gestural possibilities that ensure our (albeit limited) freedom from unreflected action. And these possibilities, although sometimes available to consciousness, are not the mind's but the body's: they belong to a motor *intelligence* that has learned to recognize social cues. (86-87)

Noland views agency as a capacity that is strongly socially structured and open enough to allow an individual creativity that hinges on one's self-aware feedback of the body doing. We quite literally compose agency as potentials for action in the (re)organization of neural pathways that get materialized as discrete embodied assemblages of doing, gestures of meaning that exceed subjective meaning.

DISCURSIVE READINESS POTENTIAL

To return to the anecdote of writing a conference paper outlined above, the problem I faced in taking up the conference genre was a matter of agency. Certainly, giving the talk itself would

be a moment of discursive agency, but actually giving the talk depended on the *felt sense* that the discursive act was *available* to me, that I had already acquired the abilities (I-cans) as potentials for future enactment. In order to compose the paper, I had to compose certain kinds of agency comprised of action potentials relevant to the genre. Initially, the paper felt viscerally unavailable to me; I felt paralyzed. I could only imagine *not doing the paper*, and I looked for ways to bow out of my obligations. My perception was blocked by my inexperience with the rhetorical situation and the genre conventions, in addition to the other life pressures I struggled with at that time. The genre underwriting my talk affected me as an external material force that carried with it textual features and discourse moves that seemed to fall just out of reach for me. At the same time, I struggled to negotiate the intense internal forces related to my family and teaching situations that materialized as stress. I did not feel that the discursive act of the conference paper was within my grasp, there did not seem to be a potential for *doing* as the situation unfolded; I had no discursive agency.

As a graduate student, I was clearly adept at writing persuasive arguments, having written hundreds of pages of essays throughout my career, yet those practices did not emerge as readiness potentials. I had no experience in writing conference papers, and I had little understanding about the expectations I might face in the rhetorical situation of the conference. Given the constraints of experience that I perceived , I seemed not to have the capacity to transfer the rich body of experience in essay writing into the moment of drafting the conference paper. I couldn't actualize similar discursive moves I had made in related situations, such as undergraduate essays or graduate seminar papers.

The only potential action that seemed to emerge was not writing, yet through a series of focused meetings with my advisor, we talked explicitly about the genre conventions of the conference paper and worked collaboratively to imagine the range of possibilities for developing my ideas into a paper that would meet audience expectations. My advisor helped open pathways for connecting my prior discursive experience with the emergent situation through a collaboratively recursive and reflective process. With this revised meta-awareness of the discursive situation, I was able to open the field of possible actions available to me, to intervene in my practice of conference papers, resulting in a successful talk, composing agency through my (re)iterations of academic discourse in a new context. This experience continually feeds forward into new discursive situations, providing me with the embodied potential for navigating the conference paper scene, even when it feels out of reach. Thus, the practice of conference paper practice has enabled me to compose a readiness to act in similar situations with greater expertise and flexibility.

The notion of discursive readiness potential describes such a range of possible actions available to an agent in a discursive situation, as well as the range of possible actions that may not be felt as immediately available to one due to the contours of the situation. Furthermore, as this anecdote suggests, external resources (both human and nonhuman) can play important roles in bringing potentials for action to the actor's awareness, or helping the actor feel that those possibilities are available to be enacted. These interventions might happen through conversations, revised interpretations of sensory stimuli, focused reflection, mindful repetitions of scaffolding practices, etc. Discursive readiness potential describes how we compose agency, but it also points to how we

may revise the potentials for action that emerge to the agent.

This argument has a number of implications for literacy studies scholarship and composition pedagogy. First, the concept highlights the fact that we cannot conceptualize literacy practices primarily as social systems, or at least only as social systems. We must recognize that one of the consequences of literacy practices is that literate experiences can have measurable effects on our neural system and embodiment through the practice of practice. Acquiring literacies entails not only taking on new ideologies, but developing new bodies and extensions to other bodies, tools, technologies, and other material objects in our socio-cultural scenes of writing. As Gorzelsky argues, literacy scholars may consider exploring new research cooperations with colleagues in other disciplines, such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics, etc.[12]

"Discursive readiness potential lends itself to conversations about the transfer of learning in the composition classroom by highlighting how the focused and repeated practice of discrete literate practices and self-aware feedback loops between writer, the writer's writing body, and the world may cultivate greater likelihoods for doing similar actions in emergent context-rich social situations. Accordingly, this view of agency invites a consideration of metacognitive activities, such as reflection and reflective writing, that might generate opportunities for writers to compose new agencies or reinforce existing literacy action potentials."

Additionally, we may turn to existing research in neuroscience, for example, in order to revise our theories of composing practices and processes of learning and doing literacies. In this way, my argument aligns with Fleckenstein's call for a return to cognitive studies by highlighting how we may investigate cognition and individual writing processes from an ecological perspective that ties together mind-body-world. Discursive readiness potential identifies and explains the response patterns that we automatically generate as potentials for action, and it articulates how those automatic response patterns may be revised through the practice of practice in combination with mental force, which allows the individual to compose new potentials for action. In doing so, the individual not only cultivates socio-culturally significant skills and abilities but changes the internal dynamics of the neural pathways that make one literate practice more or less likely to happen in a given situation than a range of other potential actions. Thus, discursive readiness potential offers a process theory of *how* we change what is internal to us as embodied agents within rich material socio-cultural contexts.

Discursive readiness potential lends itself to conversations about the transfer of learning in the composition classroom by highlighting how the focused and repeated practice of discrete literate practices and self-aware feedback loops between writer, the writer's writing body, and the world may cultivate greater likelihoods for doing similar actions in emergent context-rich social situations. Accordingly, this view of agency invites a consideration of metacognitive activities, such as reflection and reflective writing, that might generate opportunities for writers to compose new agencies or reinforce existing literacy action potentials. For example, reflective writings that ask students to use mental force to identify and work through emergent problems in the writing process may cultivate learning transfer to new situations.

Finally, discursive readiness potential suggests we emphasize *practicing* writing practices in our composition pedagogies. For instance, we might revisit the role of sentence-based pedagogies (and other pedagogies that emphasize the practice of practices).[13] Indeed, developing reiterative embodied writing activities may strengthen students' capacities to act within genres, discourse communities, etc. Further, the argument suggests that focusing on developing a capacity to compose in certain genres might strengthen the potential for that writing practice to emerge in later contexts. Thus, we may consider how genre uptake is regulated by our sedimented experiences and literate practices as much as it is shaped by unfolding social activity in a live rhetorical situation.

The function of agency, according to discursive readiness potential, is to winnow the range of possible actions into one actuality, one action. The practice of practice sediments literacy actions as potentialities, which we may revise through mental force, thereby composing agency. The agent does not invent actions from an empty field but can only act based on a field of possible actions that emerge in a situation. These potentials for action get folded into the body through repeated practice over time, sedimented as potential bodily assemblages eligible for signification in layered neural pathways. Literacy as process entails the composing of agency through discrete practices accumulated over time and enshrined in sedimented forms, potentials for action. Discursive readiness potential describes the range of potentialities available to an agent through practice and awareness within the space-time of a discursive situation. Discursive readiness potential provides the agent with flexibility; agency is the capacity to navigate that flexibility.

NOTES

[1] My sincere thanks to Gwen Gorzelsky for her countless contributions toward this project. Thanks also to Ade Jenkins, Jason Slone, Jeff Pruchnic, Kim Lacey, Ted Slingerland, and the reviewers and editors at *LiCS*.

[2] Throughout, I discuss agency in an ecological framework that resonates across several intellectual schools of thought, including actor network theory (ANT). My approach is informed by research in embodied cognition, which posits that our capacities to think about or conceptualize the world are fundamentally shaped by the complex feedback and feedforward loops between our minds, bodies, and socio-cultural material situations. However, while embodied studies (including embodied cognition) and ANT overlap in some important respects (especially concerning the emergence of activity out of networks of human), this essay hews to embodied cognition and neuroscience because of my primary interest in understanding agency as a function of embodiment and human cognition. The argument thus follows similar work in composition and rhetoric (Cooper, "Being Linked and "Rhetorical Agency"; Lu and Horner; Rickert; Syverson), which draws on the related fields of embodied cognition and neurophenomenology (e.g., Clark; Damasio; Maturana and Varela; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch; Noë; Shapiro; and Thompson). See Brandt and Clinton for an introduction of ANT to literacy studies and Tara Fenwick and Richard Edwards for a helpful introduction to ANT. See Blackman for a discussion of how ANT is relevant to embodied analyses (120-21).

[3] Recent work in composition suggests that our field has insufficiently theorized agency and takes up interdisciplinary work on embodied cognition for revised conceptualizations of agency (Cooper; Lu and Horner; Rickert). See also William Reddy's argument that the postmodern death of the subject has limited our capacity to understand agency as an embodied issue.

[4] These constraints are akin to Lloyd Bitzer's conception of constraints in a rhetorical situation. The essay as a whole, however, somewhat complicates (in a complementary way) Bitzer's notion of rhetorical situation by positing that experience materialized in neural activation patterns and represented by one's discursive readiness potential may contribute to the constraints in a situation.

[5] Brian Massumi also describes a returning back on the body to recursively signify embodied intensities.

[6] Bawarshi adopts the notion of meaning potential from linguist M. A. K. Halliday's work on social semiotics to describe how a genre affords social actions. My use of potentiality and action potentials differs significantly from Bawarshi, for while Bawarshi brackets off individual experience prior to genre uptake (10) and situates potentiality as a property or aspect of genre (88-89), I emphasize the importance of understanding the cumulative effect of experience in shaping potentials for action and offer in the following a model for understanding how experience shapes action potentials. Thus, I situate potentiality within the individual as bio-cultural actor.

[7] Some readers may object to the turn to the biological sciences in my interdisciplinary approach, suggesting a turn to psychoanalysis or poststructuralism may be more appropriate. Sorting out the philosophical arguments that underlie tensions between research in the biological sciences and poststructuralism or psychoanalysis far exceeds the scope of this essay. I turn to neurosciences and embodied cognition because their findings are grounded in evidenced-based research, an approach that comports with the empirical orientations of much literacy studies scholarship. See Gwen Gorelsky's argument that literacy is biocultural; Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou's argument that the neglect of neurobiology in analytical approaches that stem from continental philosophy is no longer justifiable or defensible (81); and Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard's edited collection *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and the Humanities,* which explores what it would mean

for humanists and scientists to work together on scholarly research programs.

[8] "Barelife" resounds with Massumi's readiness potential, which describes the stop beat of action as overfull with intensity—a field of potential actions narrowed down to one actual action, which becomes phenomenological experience.

[9] I use assemblage in line with Andy Clark's argument that our body-world loops extend the mind into the world. According to Clark's principle of ecological assembly, the cognizer recruits whatever neural, bodily, or environmental resources are at hand that will achieve an acceptable result with minimal effort. The mind can recruit and extend the body through any material objects in the environment, and with enough time and practice, these objects become transparent to the mind. For example, Clark writes, "When you sign your name, the pen is not normally your focus (unless it is out of ink, etc.). The pen in use is no more the focus of your attention than is the hand that grips it. Both are transparent equipment" (10). ANT offers similar approaches toward theorizing the assemblages between human and nonhuman actors. From the perspective of ANT, we are invited to see how nonhuman actors influence social activity on a level playing field as human actors. That is, without privileging the agency of human actors, we can better understand how a network of actors shape activity. As Fenwick and Edwards put it, "ANT analyses focus on the minute negotiations that go on at the points of connection. Things persuade, coerce, seduce, resist, and compromise each other as they come together. They may connect with other things in ways that gather them into a particular collective, or they may pretend to connect, partially connect, or feel disconnected and excluded even when they are connected" (x-xi). The two approaches are complementary, yet I ground my argument in embodied cognition because it dovetails with recent research in composition on agency (e.g., Cooper, "Rhetorical Agency" and Lu and Horner), and it offers a perspective on action in the context of individual cognitive processes situated in broader brain-body-world networks. Such a focus on how our assemblages with other nonhuman actors affects cognition differs from ANT's approach, which, as Bruno Latour notes, would de-center the human.

[10] See also Debra Hawhee's analysis of ancient Greek embodied rhetorics in *Bodily Arts*. Hawhee describes an ancient practice of "embodied training that reliesC on the repeated production of encounters" (84) that transform the "body-mind complex" (87), or capacities and tendencies of the trained body (88). Hawhee's work thus reveals an ancient network of practices that yield a readiness to act akin to Trimbur's emphasis on a practice of practice as a mechanism for cultivating agency.

[11] See neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's somatic-marker hypothesis, which argues that the body marks experiences with positive or negative affects, thus shaping the likelihood that a potential action will be realized by encouraging us to drop or take up an action (173-74).

[12] See also Slingerland and Collard.

[13] Robert Connors persuasively argues for a return to sentence-level pedagogies by reviewing flaws in the field's hasty and ungrounded refutation of the approach. See also Micciche's model in "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar," which features imitation exercises that practice the (re)iteration of discourse followed by a reflective analysis of the style.

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"Get Excited People!": Gendered Acts of Literacy in a Social Sorority

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ABSTRACT

Using the methodology of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, this article studies how one undergraduate writer, "Polly," brings about her gendered identity as a leader of a social sorority through writing emails to motivate members to attend events. I offer a six-item taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses to articulate the shared values of the sorority; excite members about events; and craft a unique, interesting, and relatable peer persona for herself. I connect each of Polly's rhetorical strategies to research on gendered communication to understand how she uses the strategies to navigate her audience's expectations of her gender and her leadership. A quantitative, temporal analysis of Polly's use of all six strategies over the course of a year suggests that sororities (and other student organizations that offer leadership roles to students) present time and space for participants to try out a range of intellectual tools for different leadership personas, which can transfer to future rhetorical situations. This opportunity for rhetorical experimentation allows students to play and experiment with their public selves and group affinities.

KEYWORDS

sororities; literacy; leadership; e-mail; third-wave feminism

Third-wave feminism is a cultural movement and form of feminist activism that began in the early 1990s, including a broad range of political action as well as scholarly work. Influenced by postmodernism and particularly the work of Judith Butler, third-wave feminist scholarship theorizes gender not as an internal characteristic, but as an ongoing performance: "acts, repetitions, and citational practices that continually mark a persona as gendered" (Almjeld 73). For literacy and language studies, third-wave feminism has meant an increased focus on the way language is also a gendered performance. Third-wave feminist linguistic analysis studies individuals in social contexts "in relation to social groups who judge their linguistic behaviour and also in relation to hypothesised gendered stereotypes"

(Mills 115). For example, instead of making a generalization about certain uses of language being sexist (as second-wave feminism may have done), third-wave feminist analysis of language would look at how a single word might become sexist in a specific context because of a vocal inflection (Mills 119).

Previous research in literacy studies has focused attention on the interplay between gender and literacy practices but has called for more research that views gender as "a complex and diverse category rather than as a fixed and essential characteristic we each possess" (Jones 161). Because literacy is tied to social conventions, available discourses, and situated identities, researching how young people learn literacy can provide insight into how young people learn to perform gender (Peterson and Parr). In line with the methodology of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, this article studies how one writer, "Polly," brings about her gendered identity as a leader of a social sorority through writing e-mails to motivate members to attend sorority events. In the position of both a peer and a leader, Polly balances the authority of her position (i.e. the need to tell members what to do) with gendered expectations to be likable and friendly. I first review the literature on gendered performances in sororities and women's leadership to situate Polly's rhetorical task. I then offer a six-item taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses over the course of the year. The first three rhetorical strategies—flattery, silly humor, and incentive—help her maintain a relatable, peer persona within the sorority. The fourth rhetorical strategy, excitement, is part of the emotional labor required in Polly's position: getting her audience excited about something regardless of how she personally feels about it. The last two strategies—nudge of encouragement and strategic humor—emerge from Polly's desire to be a peer rather than an authority figure, mitigating authoritarian commands, and deflating some of the tension she feels around her leadership role. I connect each of Polly's rhetorical strategies to research on gendered communication to understand how the strategies help her navigate her audience's expectations concerning gender and leadership.

Though I classify and explain Polly's rhetorical strategies, I also acknowledge that written texts are not objects that can be pinned down at a specific moment in time; rather literacy is "a constantly shifting set of unstable, internally various, fluid and heterogeneous practices" (Horner 2). To capture this instability and flux, literacy research must understand how people "continuously rework, and thereby renew, literacy, texts, practices, and contexts" (Horner 6). A quantitative, temporal analysis of Polly's use of all six strategies over the course of a year suggests that sororities (and other student organizations that offer leadership roles to students) present time and space for participants to try out a range of intellectual tools for different leadership personas, which can transfer to future rhetorical situations. This opportunity for rhetorical experimentation allows students to play and experiment with their public selves and group affinities.

GENDERED PERFORMANCES AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL SORORITIES

The recovery of women's rhetoric, Carol Mattingly notes, tends to seek out the rhetoric of groups that "most resemble academic feminists" ideologically regardless of the actual scope of their

influence (101). For example, feminist scholars "praise" the leaders of the National Woman Suffrage Association because of its liberal values over the more conservative Women's Christian Temperance Union, although the latter had a significantly greater membership (Mattingly 102). In their 2012 survey of the field of feminist rhetorical criticism, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch stress the importance of a broader, deeper, and more inclusive view of women's rhetoric, recommending a focus on "places at which we have not looked seriously or methodically before" in the hopes that such analysis will help feminist rhetorical scholars "think again about what women's patterns of action seem to suggest about rhetoric, writing, leadership, activism, and rhetorical expertise" (72). Janine Solberg, for example, explains how women's stenography work in the early twentieth-century office that appears entirely clerical actually draws on significant domain knowledge and contextual knowledge. Solberg's work demonstrates the importance of "digging up" contemporary women's rhetorical leadership in research sites that may seem insubstantial in terms of literacy, even to the most astute feminist observer. Solberg writes, "as historiography in composition and rhetoric continues to broaden and mature, we must continue to ask whose literacy experiences are being left out" (17).

With over 300,000 members on over 600 campuses in the United States and Canada (National Panhellenic Conference), social sororities are one of the most powerful communities to which many female college students might belong in their college years. Historian Diana Turk's research on sorority life suggests that the first sororities in the 1870s created opportunities for women to perform the role of "college student" previously only available to men. These sororities supported women intellectually and socially amidst hostility from male students who believed that women in higher education disrupted the "natural order" of society (Turk 3). In sorority chapter meetings, women practiced speeches for each other and pressured each other to do well in school to represent their sorority and campus women as a whole in a positive light. To counteract common arguments that attending college was "unwomanly," sororities broadened the definition of proper "womanhood" to encompass both social skills and intellectual capacities (Turk 40). Sororities made no distinction between married and unmarried women and supported women who chose to enter the workforce rather than have children. Graduates could use their sorority connections after college to enter "previously closed or difficult-to-enter fields" (Turk 153). In short, sororities from the 1870s through the 1900s enabled gendered performances along a spectrum of feminism.

In the 1920s, when the presence of women became a more normal part of college life, sororities "jettisoned their academic and literary work in favor of social activities" and became more of the social clubs they are today (Turk 47). Possibly as a result of this social focus, contemporary investigations into sorority life suggest that they actually validate rigid and traditional gendered behaviors. In *Inside Greek U.: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power, and Prestige* Alan D. DeSantis finds that "fraternities and sororities fiercely reproduce *many* of the most traditional and harmful ideas about gender through their scripted performances" because "the rigidity of the Greek institution produces a subculture where deviant performances—performances that are potentially liberating because of their ability to expand brothers' and sisters' gendered repertoire—are prohibited" (27). Specific studies of sorority life suggest that sorority culture propagates traditional gender roles,

leading to the stigmatization of sorority involvement. Lisa Handler's study of sororities as "gender strategy" demonstrates that though women use sororities as a means of exploring ideas about womanhood, they remain "marked by the inequalities that characterize gender relations in the wider society" (252). In a similar vein, Barbara J. Risman also finds that sororities encourage behaviors that socialize women into marriage and staying at home with children. Risman writes that her findings are "not to suggest that none of these women will become surgeons, lawyers, or executives; only that the selves they have nurtured while in college will need considerable reorganization if and when they enter demanding occupational social worlds" (138). So while historical sororities worked to carve out a place for university women institutionally, contemporary practices of sororities and fraternities suggest that they do not support a range of gendered identities.

Though sororities have been studied as sites of women's acclimation to both college and the social world beyond, what remains intriguing and un-studied about sororities is how they offer women a chance to be leaders. Sororities and fraternities value leadership, planning leadership retreats for members, requiring leadership conferences for executive members, and marketing their organizations for their leadership opportunities (Hevel, Martin, and Pascarella 268). In my own yearlong ethnography of a social sorority, both alumnae and current members said that leadership was one of the most important things they learned in their time at the sorority and one of the key reasons they joined in the first place. Leadership also resonates with the sorority's practices: alumnae who travel to visit chapters to help with projects are called "leadership consultants," the national organization sponsors a "leadership institute" every summer, and elected and appointed roles are referred to as "leadership positions." The discourse of the sorority frames the women as leaders, and the emphasis on leadership re-frames the sorority as less of a social club and more of a pre-professional organization.

Because writing is one way young people learn and enact gender roles (Peterson and Parr), studying women's writing in a sorority can suggest how college-age women learn to "perform" gender at this stage in their lives, particularly how they wield and experiment with forms of power and leadership in their writing. Despite the advances of feminism, women of the millennial generation still express hesitation about being leaders. Surveys show that while millennial women believe they are as ambitious and charismatic as men, "they are slightly less likely to see themselves as leaders, visionaries, self-confident, or willing to take risks" (Bentley University 17). A 2008 study of millennial girls by the Girl Scout Research Institute found that girls said they did not want to be leaders because they were afraid of "being laughed at, making people mad at them, coming across as bossy, or not being liked by people" (Schoenberg 19). The Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership at Princeton University reported that while undergraduate women did much of the strategic planning for student groups, they were less likely to take on visible leadership positions or play up their credentials and experience (Steering Committee).

Moreso than undergraduate men, undergraduate women fear the criticism that may come with a highly visible persona (Steering Committee). Research bears out these fears, demonstrating the penalties women face for taking on leadership positions, particularly in male-dominated fields. A psychological study by Madeline Heilman and Tyler Okimoto found that people tended to view

successful women as being too individualistic and lacking in compassion (81). In particular, women perceived as successful managers were also perceived as selfish, deceitful, and cold (81). People held these perceptions of female managers regardless of whether or not the female managers performed nurturing and community-oriented behaviors in the workplace. As Heilman and Okimoto conclude, "It thus appears to take little more than the knowledge that a woman is successful at male sex-typed work [such as being a boss or manager] to instigate interpersonally negative reactions to her" (82). And although the all-female audience of a sorority may alleviate some of these pressures because women are less likely to encounter resistance in an area that is understood as a "feminine context" (Ridgeway 648), the traditional gender performances scripted in the sorority mean that women may continue to encounter resistance to their leadership.

In conducting a yearlong ethnography of a social sorority using the tools of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, I was interested in how acts of literacy were also gendered acts of leadership. In particular, I wanted to know how the women's writing in leadership positions navigated complex expectations about gender and leadership. I chose to analyze a set of twenty-seven e-mails written by the sorority's Director of Administration, "Polly," to convince sorority members to attend the group's events. Many of the sorority's literacy practices functioned to organize and manage the group, but many were also copied or only slightly altered from model texts. These e-mails, however, were mostly Polly's own creation. They were even more of Polly's own creation because this particular chapter of the sorority had opened on campus only a year before Polly took her position, meaning that only one other person had ever done her job. Polly thus had a fair amount of freedom in composing the e-mails.

The e-mails were sent only to members and so did not bear the burden of explaining the sorority to outsiders or developing the sorority's external image. They did, however, bear the burden of motivating women to attend multiple activities every week, a situation complicated by the sorority's positioning in the university. Because this research took place at a small, residential university, many students on campus were involved and held leadership positions in pre-professional clubs, social clubs, residence hall councils, community service organizations, and faith-based groups. Students' calendars were full of all-campus events like speakers, sporting events, receptions, and other celebrations. The sorority participated in the Panhellenic council, the campus' umbrella organization for sorority life, which planned events that challenged sororities to compete against each other; a large part of "winning" these events was having the most members attend. The national organization of the sorority also set forth practices, standards, and guidelines for the functioning of individual chapters, which meant further obligations for the women in terms of the kinds of events they had to hold and the expectations for attendance at these events. All of these institutionalized pressures meant that sorority members had significant obligations to attend events, so the sorority leadership developed systematic literacy practices like the weekly e-mail to motivate them to do so.

Polly's formidable challenge was to inspire 110 over-committed, academically driven women to attend anywhere from five to ten events per week. Polly told me that that attendance at events was a problem:

Faith: What kinds of things do you have to work hard to motivate people to do?

Polly: I think the things that aren't mandatory, anything like that. Sisterhood events, other people's philanthropy events, if we don't make a big deal out of it, don't tell them to sign up for it, no one wants to go.

Faith: They signed up for the sorority; I assume they knew what it involved. So why are there problems with getting people to participate?

Polly: That is a big thing. People don't go to things and we've always had that question and tried to answer it and I think that they feel like there's so much going on. A lot of members were like, "We're too over-programmed!" But we are the leadership team and we go to everything and we still do homework. People just get in the mindset that they don't have to go and they have better things to do.

The e-mails had to be a thoughtful, audience-driven, and strategic communication inspired to get people to decide that they do not "have better things to do" but that the sorority's events are the *best* things to do every week. Polly also faces gendered expectations about how women should act, which are amplified by the traditional gender roles of a sorority. Sorority members may stereotype her as "bossy" or may dislike her if she is too commanding or domineering. She has to maintain a relatively professional persona so that people will take her and her organization seriously, similar to the challenge faced by student writers working in adult-driven professional organizations (see for example Deans; Ketter and Hunter). But Polly also wants to be relatable and friendly, inserting her personality and voice into her writing, a task more similar to that faced by students in extracurricular writing situations (see for example Roozen; Comstock; Haas et al.). In each e-mail, Polly has to write with an audience in mind to capture the interests of the membership, negotiate her role as both a peer and a leader to maintain friendships, and represent herself and the group in a positive light.

DATA AND METHODS

Between September 2012 and May 2013, my graduate assistant, Anne M. Dimond, and I interviewed thirty total members of the sorority: ten members of the chapter's leadership team, fifteen women in peripheral involvement positions, four new members who joined the chapter after the recruitment process in January 2013, and one woman who went through the recruitment process but joined another sorority. In our interviews, we asked the women to narrate their paths of participation in to the sorority, describing and explaining their motivations for participation. To triangulate my analyses of their experiences, I interviewed twelve sorority alumnae and seven campus staff members involved in fraternity/sorority life both about their own fraternity/sorority experience and about their theories of student learning and participation in fraternity/sorority life. I attended fifty-two total events, including weekly chapter meetings, leadership team meetings, and fundraising events. I collected written artifacts as well, including newsletters, minutes, officer position applications, PowerPoint presentations, forms, and handbooks.

I interviewed Polly near the end of her one-year term to understand her writing process. I worked with an undergraduate researcher, Carolyn German,[1] who was also a member of a campus sorority,

to develop questions for a discourse-based interview (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington). Discourse-based interviews are a means of understanding "non-classroom, tacit writing knowledges" that a writer derives "through repeated experience" (223). In this method, the interviewer collects a body of writing and interviews the writer about alterations the writer made at different points. A typical question would ask, for example, why the writer uses a formal greeting in one e-mail and a humorous greeting in another e-mail. This methodology is useful for identifying sub-conscious and taken-for-granted writing practices that writers do not articulate on a daily basis (228).

Carolyn and I compared and contrasted all of the e-mails to develop a list of interview questions for Polly about her various rhetorical choices. I was concerned that I would make too much of Polly's choices, and I did not want her to feel like she had to make up a reason for any choice. As a member of a campus sorority who had held a leadership position, Carolyn helped me to identify rhetorical strategies that were likely more intentional on Polly's part. For example, I wanted to classify every use of an exclamation point as a rhetorical strategy, but Carolyn noted that sorority women often used exclamation points offhandedly. Carolyn identified the more intentional exclamation points: those that served the purpose of getting the readers excited about doing something that they otherwise might not be excited to do. For example: "Be sure to know when your tabling time is and be there promptly when your scheduled shift starts so others who have class can get to it!" As Polly confirmed for us in her interview, the exclamation point here makes an otherwise demanding sentence sound exciting and conversational. I believe that, for the most part, we were able to highlight the rhetorical strategies that held meaning for Polly.

Polly said in the interview that she wrote her e-mails in short, easily digestible paragraphs so that members could use the e-mails as a reference for the whole week. Carolyn and I segmented each e-mail into separate paragraphs, because we wanted each segment to reflect Polly's view of the composing process of the e-mail (usually, each paragraph had a heading and was in a different color). We only diverged from this process of segmenting at a handful of instances where we noticed a distinct tonal shift, such as an instance where the first few sentences of the paragraph were informational and the last sentence was humorous.

Once the data were separated into segments, our next step was to create a coding scheme to identify and classify Polly's rhetorical strategies. Polly told me that during the chapter's weekly meeting (typically occurring on a weeknight at 9 PM), she takes notes in a notebook. Though the meetings often have a PowerPoint presentation, Polly told me she crafts the weekly e-mail mostly from memory and her notes. These notes, however, are only a skeleton of what actually appears in the e-mail. Polly allowed me to take a photo of the handwritten notes she took for one of the weekly e-mails, part of which I have transcribed below along with the corresponding line from the final version of the e-mail to make her additions apparent (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Polly's Handwritten Notes and Her Final Written E-mail.

Polly's Handwritten Notes	**The Final E-mail**
Next week is formal chapter with elections --Pins	Next week's chapter is formal, and elections will be held during this time. Make sure you are dressed all fancy like and wear yo pins, bring yo hankies to congratulate girls, and look all classy. [2]
Polish on Sunday 1-5 --Wear Philanthropy Day Outfit --Black/white w accent of red	Polish on Sunday from 1-5. Make sure to wear your philanthropy day clothes so we can catch and make sure y'all are lookin' fiiiiine as eva. Philanthropy day remember is black, white, and a red accent.
7-10 Room 310 Day Chairs Meeting	Day chairs: Your meeting is tomorrow from 7-10 in Room 310! Holla

Based on the comparison between her handwritten notes and the final e-mail, Carolyn and I identified a "rhetorical strategy" as anything beyond the basic factual information of the sorority's activities that week. We coded basic factual information, such as a declarative sentence stating the time and date of an event, as "null."

Carolyn created the first draft of the coding scheme using grounded theory (Charmaz), an analytical method that creates theories that are "grounded" in the data, leading to a theoretical understanding of participants' experiences. I tested out Carolyn's coding scheme on the first two e-mails, and we revised the coding scheme together so that we could both use the coding scheme consistently. To apply the codes to the rest of the data, we used a method Peter Smagorinsky calls "collaborative coding," developed from and greatly influenced by Vygotsky's work on the social construction of language (401). Smagorinsky works with a doctoral student to "discuss each data segment before agreeing on how to bracket and code it," reaching agreement "through collaborative discussion" (401). To mitigate issues of power, Smagorinsky works with students with areas of expertise "complementary" to his own (401). Carolyn's membership in a campus sorority and her expertise in undergraduate slang complemented my expertise in the sorority from my ethnographic research. Carolyn and I independently assigned codes to the segments in five of the twenty-seven e-mails and then met to discuss areas of disagreement and revise the coding scheme. She and I coded the rest of the interviews on our own, after which we met again to discuss areas of disagreement and come to consensus, again revising the coding scheme.

We ended up with 402 total segments of data coded into seven different categories: flattery, incentive, excitement, nudge of encouragement, silly humor, strategic humor, and null. Below, I explain each strategy as a gendered act of literacy, focusing on the way the strategies respond to a specific social context.

MAINTAINING LIKABILITY: FLATTERY, SILLY HUMOR, AND INCENTIVE

Polly opens most e-mails with flattery, grabbing the reader's attention via a compliment that typically refers to the physical appearance of her audience ("Hello pretty ladayss"). Linguist Janie Rees-Miller argues that these kinds of compliments, disconnected from a specific task, function as "phatic communication," meaning "a kind of small talk that can establish and maintain social relationships through increasing a sense of solidarity and intimacy through shared values" (2682). Polly's use of compliments in the opening suggests that she is trying to build a relationship with her audience through their shared valuation of physical appearance. Later on, in the body of the e-mail, Polly uses flattery to motivate the women to take pictures of themselves or "selfies" at sorority-sanctioned events and text them to Polly to receive points for attendance. Polly often uses compliments to remind the women to take selfies: "Remember, take pretty pics: Group pics, selfies, I love them all and send them to the Gmail address that I keep posting. You will never get the points if I don't know your pretty face was there!" The selfie-as-participation rewards physical presence as a form of participation. Polly draws on the shared value of attractive, physical appearance to establish commonality with her audience and to speak to them as a group of friends.

Polly's use of compliments situates her as a peer to her audience. To strengthen this identity, and to remain likable and relatable to her audience, Polly uses her trademark "silly" sense of humor. In these instances, Polly uses humor in a way disconnected from a message she needs to convey to her audience. She alters the spelling of a word so that the audience will read it in a certain tone (perhaps in relation to an image or a joke that stands separate from the purpose of the message), inserts pictures or jokes that feel random from the central messages of the text ("AAAAAAAND in honor of our snow day, I have attached a picture of a Corgi doing a happy dance"), or uses humor as an intro or outro to the central message of the text ("Peace, Love, and Unicorns, Polly").

Humor presents a means for Polly to assert her identity in a way that does not threaten or subvert the organization. Diane M. Martin finds that for women in middle management:

> humor as lightness and play allows for relief from stress without the potential damage to important organizational relationships that may come from other kinds of outlets. Moreover, when women assert their ideas and will with executives, humor can play a softening, risk-reducing role in their resistance. (165)

The silly, almost child-like nature of Polly's sense of humor establishes her identity within the group in a way that is nonthreatening to both the membership and the organization, allowing her to play around with the seriousness of her leadership role.

Polly said that she felt more comfortable with the e-mails as the year went along, mostly because people got to know her. She told me that this familiarity with the audience was a result of her physical presence at events:

> Faith: Do you feel over the course of the past year like the girls have gotten to know you better?
>
> Polly: I think so. Just by being present at things. They always see me. I'm always doing stuff.

> I'm always being weird. So then if I'm always there, they always see that.

In this way, Polly's "weird" sense of humor in the e-mails correlates with the weirdness of her sense of humor in face-to-face interactions within the group ("I'm always being weird"). Polly also noted that the e-mails contain a callback to her physical presence ("being present at things"), creating a synergy between her physical presence and her e-mails.

Polly also maintains her likability by offering an incentive—usually something free like food, T-shirts, or other prizes—to push the reader in the direction of selecting the sorority's events over all other possible commitments. For example: "Chi Omega is having a fundraiser next Tuesday at Red Mango from 6-9pm, go support a fellow Greek organization and eat some yummy fro-yo." Polly noted in our interview, "Anytime we don't have to pay for something, people go crazy!" The incentives help the women decide among opportunities for involvement but also establish the benevolence of Polly and the rest of the sorority leadership. By playing up the incentive, she shows that she is not demanding that people do something because she says so. Additionally, her emphasis on the incentives for participation frames her (and the sorority leadership) as "nice," asking for participation and offering something in return.

LEADING BY EMOTION: EXCITEMENT

In addition to leading by organizing events, sorority leaders are expected to be leaders by demonstrating for other people how to feel at those events. In the segments Carolyn and I coded "excitement," Polly expresses excitement over an event or task in an effort to spread positivity and encourage her audience to participate ("Our pretty newsletter went out today and our sweatshirts will be coming in soon! Yay for new things!"). She also highlights or amplifies her excitement about the event or task in an attempt to transfer that excitement to the audience ("Our fall philanthropy is already beginning to be planned for next Fall so GET EXCITED!!!").

In this way, "emotional labor" was a central part of Polly's job. Emotional labor connotes the emotional performances (typically disingenuous) required in certain jobs, such as a flight attendant being patient or a security guard looking stern (Miller 572). These emotions are intended to meet organizational goals and are often mandated by management (Miller 572). In these situations, emotions become "organizational commodities" to be put on display for the benefit of the organization and often result in a "mind-body" split for the worker (Miller 572). Polly told me that she tried to inject energy and excitement into each event to build up anticipation:

> Polly: If it's something that really needs to be hyped up like our social events this semester, usually I write that it's going to be awesome, everybody's going to be there and make it seem like it's going to be this great thing even if it's not.
>
> Faith: How do you feel about that? Does it create a weird disconnect like, "I gotta be excited about stuff!"
>
> Polly: I guess kind of. It kind of sucks. But all of us on the leadership team know that we're just expected to be at everything and have a good attitude so yeah, if we don't, no one else will.

The emotional rules for different jobs vary, but women tend to be expected to "suppress feelings of anger and to convey happiness, warmth, and friendliness" (Erickson and Ritter 147). The constant management and suppression of feelings often leads to feelings of "burnout and inauthenticity," especially for women managers (Erickson and Ritter 146). It also leads to a kind of mind-body split, where the worker acts out emotions that he or she does not actually feel (which, as Polly states, "kind of sucks"). Polly, however, attempts to re-integrate her body into her e-mails by referencing in-person experiences of sorority meetings in the e-mails. For example, the leadership team found that women were not very excited about an upcoming party, which was going to be themed after a James Bond movie. To reveal the theme to the chapter in an exciting way, they dressed up as characters from James Bond movies, played the James Bond theme song, and entered the chapter meeting as spies and villains. It was silly and fun, and Polly did a somersault down the center aisle of the chapter meeting as part of her performance. Polly references this performance in that week's e-mail, regarding a specific section of information on an upcoming campus event: "I apologize this section will not be as in depth as the other one: because I was outside mentally preparing myself to look like a fool rolling on the ground in front of you all." By referencing an inside joke from the chapter meeting, Polly connects her disembodied e-mail voice to the energy and humor of the women's embodied experience in the chapter meeting.

"In addition to funneling the excitement of the meeting into the e-mail, the reminder of Polly's body—and the bodies of the other members of the leadership team—demonstrates to the sorority members that their leadership does not consist of disembodied voices commanding them to do things, but that their leaders are human beings alongside them."

For Polly, I suspect this move serves to re-integrate her body into the e-mails as a means of mending some of the mind-body split she feels about having to feign excitement for events. Amanda Sinclair notes that successful leaders are often portrayed as being able to "defy their bodies in what they do" and being "beyond bodies" (389). A feminist approach to leadership, however, allows for the "integration of bodily sensations" into leadership, using bodies as a means of learning and leading (Christensen 266). In addition to funneling the excitement of the meeting into the e-mail, the reminder of Polly's body—and the bodies of the other members of the leadership team—demonstrates to the sorority members that their leadership does not consist of disembodied voices commanding them to do things, but that their leaders are human beings alongside them.

NAVIGATING AUTHORITY: NUDGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC HUMOR

Polly and the other members of the leadership team were concerned about being disliked for exercising their authority. Sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway writes that people hold "status beliefs" about what people should do and how people should act based on factors such as race, class, gender, or occupation (637). When people act outside of these status beliefs—such as a woman leader being

assertive or resistant—they are assumed to be incompetent (637). The sorority leadership was concerned about asserting their authority in ways that would be perceived as socially inappropriate. Earlier in the year, one member had sternly lectured the women about not drinking at the sorority's events. Polly felt that this lecture unnecessarily scared the women, many of whom decided not to attend the next event at all for fear of getting in trouble:

> Angela went up and just kind of scared the crap out of everybody, like, "You cannot under any circumstances drink, this is really bad, you cannot have one sip of alcohol!" She just made it this very big thing. So I think if you [do that], you come off as this scary person who's just trying to get a point across, instead of making it something that's relatable.

To negate some of the "scariness" of a commanding statement, Polly uses a rhetorical strategy Carolyn and I termed the "nudge of encouragement." Carolyn and I recognized the "nudge of encouragement" by associating it with the physical gesture of gently elbowing another person to spur them to do something. In the nudge of encouragement, Polly offers help, assistance, or a gentle reminder to "make sure" to do something ("Also, make sure you are going to study hours. If problems arise, contact Annabelle and she will help you! :)"). Segments labeled "nudge of encouragement" often employ an emoticon smiley face at the end of the segment (a colon followed by a right parenthesis). The smiley face at the end inflects a cheerful tone to the writing, calling to mind the body of the writer, mimicking a face-to-face conversation where the writer smiles at the end of the sentence to lighten the mood of an otherwise stern statement. To distinguish meaningful smiley faces from the smiley faces that regularly crop up in everyday writing, we decided that the smiley face must shift the tone of the sentence, changing the way the reader experiences it. For example: "This e-mail contains a lot of important information and dates, so make sure to read through it all :)." The smiley face softens some of the impact of an otherwise commanding statement.

The smiley face mitigates some of the anxiety Polly feels about telling people what to do, but—as a form of emotional labor—it also hides some of Polly's frustrations. For example, in one e-mail in April, she writes in bold:

> **Fun little reminder: a funny thing happens. When you read these e-mails, you have less questions. So perhaps before posting on Facebook, ask yourself, "did I read that e-mail Polly sent out?" :) :) :) :)**

I asked Polly specifically about the tone of this particular sentence and why she wrote the four smiley faces at the end:

> I [was] super frustrated that time, when I did four [smiley faces] and I did realize that it was a little bit sassy and a little bit sarcastic and I was like, "I'll just put four so that it's happy" . . . It's kind of like, I was very frustrated that so many people were asking questions. I had to find out a way to get their attention but I didn't want them to be like, "Oh my gosh, that was super mean." So just having all those smiley faces was like, "I'm angry at you but I still love you." I was frustrated but I tried to make it so that I wasn't being a big asshole.

For Polly, the "asshole" is a leader who simply tells people what to do. The leadership persona Polly wants to create is much more friendly ("I still love you"). The smiley faces are a means of repairing whatever damage Polly suspects she has done with the tone earlier in the e-mail, nudging the

group as if to say, "You still like me, right?" Resisting an authoritarian role, Polly uses the nudge of encouragement to construct the role of a cheerful friend sending a gentle reminder to attend an event.

Polly also uses humor strategically to lighten more serious subject matter in an effort to relate to, motivate, and/or appease her audience. She draws up comic scenarios in the context of discussing rules or other important information in a relatable, funny way:

> Do not under any circumstances bring food or drink on the bus. Don't be that person. That person is not cool. If your date says "Hey, I'm bringing this on the bus" say "Hey, don't be that person."

She also makes jokes and quips to lighten the seriousness of certain information, or to evoke laughs to motivate her audience to take action:

> Alpha Nu Fish Fry: Also This Friday! Tickets are $10 and you get food. And who doesn't love food? But Polly, I do not have a ticket yet . . . They sell them at the door too. Problem Solved.

Polly's sarcasm and humor emerge in moments when she anticipates being perceived as "bossy" or "sassy," leading Carolyn and I to term this humor "strategic" because the humor was connected to the central message of the e-mail. In our interview, however, Polly talked about the jokes as "coming out" in high-stakes moments rather than as an intentional decision:

> Faith: Why did you use a joke there?
>
> Polly: Because if you continue to make everything funny then people are going to be like, "There's going to be funny little jokes in there, I should read it." And a lot of times I think the jokes come out when something is very important, like "This needs to happen." A joke came out.

Polly faces a tension between stressing the importance of the event while not appearing overbearing; in the midst of this tension, "a joke comes out." Martin's study of women in middle management finds that women use "spontaneous, individually authored humor" as a means of navigating gender "in ways that simultaneously affirms and subverts the gendered order of work" (166). For Polly, the playful use of humor says something like, "Isn't it ridiculous that I'm in charge?" which downplays her authority role but (presumably) endears her to the group as a peer. Polly noted in our interview that she uses sarcasm specifically as a form of humor that allows her to grapple with some of her own authority:

> Faith: Do you feel uncomfortable telling people that they have to do things?
>
> Polly: Yeah. Like here [pointing to the bolded "Fun Little Reminder" quoted above] I was frustrated but I tried to make it so that I wasn't being a big asshole . . . I just try to make it sarcastic. Instead of being like, "Hey, you need to read this e-mail!" I wrote, "Hey, a funny thing happens . . . ."

Martin finds that women use humor to "delve into ironic commentary on the workings of the organization" (163). Though it would be a stretch to call Polly's humor *subversive* to the workings of the organization, I believe that the humor is a kind of *resistance* to being pigeonholed as an "asshole" authority figure by constructing her own identity via writing ("the one with the weird sense of

humor"). While this identity may not be particularly subversive to the status quo of the organization, it does help her identify with the membership.

TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In the inaugural issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies,* Bruce Horner notes that literacy research must focus on "the temporal dimension of literacy" to capture its "always emergent character" (4)). Because Polly had the ability to change and revise her rhetorical strategies as the year went along, I wanted to capture some of the dynamism of her learning her role over time. I divided the twenty-seven total e-mails into four quarters to identify changes in the strategies that Polly selected over time (see Figure 1). The number inside the bar represents our count of the number of times the strategy was used in that quarter, but the space of the bar is converted to percentages to show how *often* each strategy was being used in that segment of time. For example, although excitement was used 17 times in both the first and second quarter, it made up 15.6% of the segments in the first quarter, and 13.4% of the segments in the second quarter.

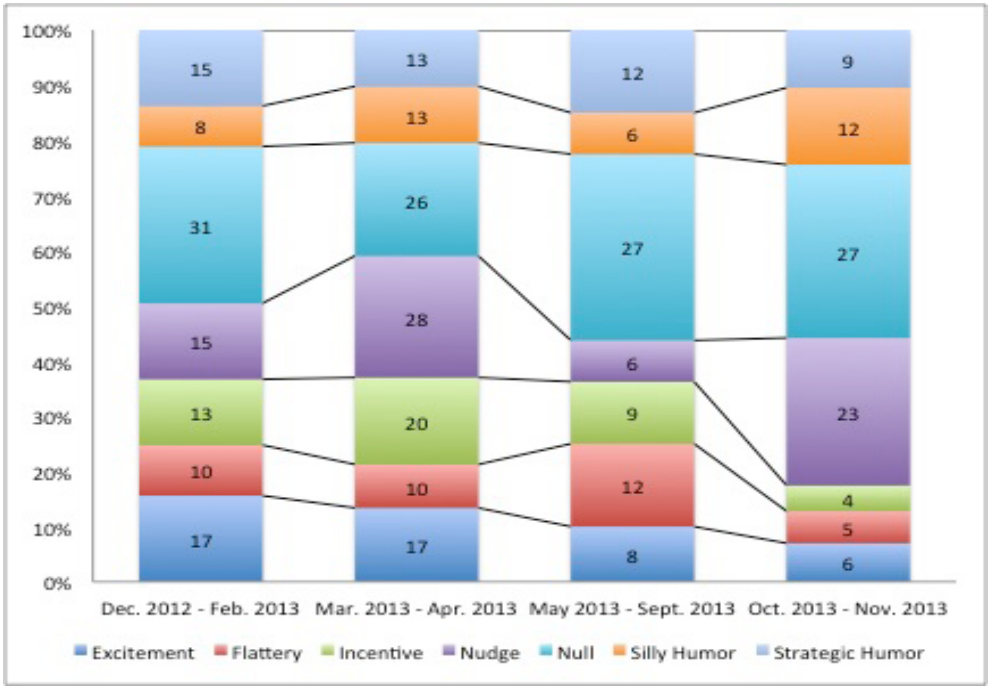

Fig. 1. Polly's Use of Strategies During One Year.

Sorority members hold positions for one year, from November to November. The first quarter represents e-mails written from December to February, when Polly was first getting used to the position. This quarter displays the most even distribution of rhetorical strategies as she tries out a variety of tactics. The second quarter represents e-mails written in March and April, when most of the sorority's work occurs. The nudge of encouragement, which masks some of Polly's frustration at

members who forget important information, increases here, presumably as a result of the increased workload and stress of sorority life at this point in the year. The nudge of encouragement increases as the year goes along, hitting a peak in the fourth quarter, suggesting the increase of Polly's frustration with members not paying attention to announcements and her determination to maintain a positive face in the e-mails.

"Her rhetorical strategies suggest that she thinks she will encounter views about what women's leadership should look like—nice, energetic, friendly, and silly—and she often plays into these expectations."

Excitement decreases gradually across the year, likely because Polly grows tired of being excited all the time. The third quarter represents the summer months (May, June, July, and August) as well as the first full month of school, September. Without the physical presence of meetings to generate embodied excitement and without as many events going on to get excited about, Polly tends to rely more on the basic facts of the e-mails, likely accounting for the large portion of "null" segments in this quarter.

The final fourth quarter represents October and November, finishing out Polly's term. She's almost out of excitement at this point, likely due to the exhaustion of having to be excited all of the time, and again uses the "nudge" more to hide some of her frustration with the women. Incentive and flattery also drop in the fourth quarter, suggesting Polly's gradual detachment from the emotional labor of the position. She does not have to worry as much about getting the women to like her at this point. Having seen her around at sorority events and reading her e-mails over the past year, Polly's audience has developed a sense of her funny and weird constructed rhetorical persona, which allows her to work less at creating that persona. Instead, she can work on playing it up through her use of silly humor, which increases slightly in the last quarter.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AS SPACES OF RHETORICAL EXPERIMENTATION

Third-wave feminist linguistics has focused on how women use certain rhetorical strategies in different situations and to what ends. For example, rather than saying that "women are polite," this method studies how and why a woman speaker might perform politeness as a pragmatic rhetorical strategy, influenced by her audience's preconceived notions about women's speech (Mills 121). I have parsed out some of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses, drawing from sociological research on women's communication strategies to demonstrate how Polly maintains her likability within the group, leads by emotion, and navigates her anxieties about authority. Now, I want to put these strategies back together and take a step back to see a more holistic picture of the gendered identity Polly has constructed for herself and its purpose.

In "situations that are closely linked with women"—such as childrearing or domestic tasks—women are viewed as authority figures and allowed to assert authority with less resistance (Ridgeway 648). Because a sorority is a women's organization, it is possible that Polly's audience may have been receptive to a more assertive leadership style. Polly's consistent use of rhetorical strategies that mitigate

her authority suggests that perhaps she views the sorority more as a mixed-gender audience. It is also possible that even low-stakes leadership induces anxiety for leaders-in-training like Polly. Her rhetorical strategies suggest that she thinks she will encounter views about what women's leadership should look like—nice, energetic, friendly, and silly—and she often plays into these expectations. Many of her strategies deflate the seriousness of her leadership position—telling jokes, offering a gentle "nudge" at the end of a command—in accordance with the gendered expectation that she appear friendly and community-oriented.

It would be a stretch to argue that Polly experiments with a *variety* of leadership styles, as she seems to adopt the sort of persona we might expect from a college-age woman in a sorority: a friendly, approachable, appearance-oriented, goofy friend. It would be fair to argue, however, that Polly is able to *experiment* with tactics for meeting the gendered expectations of leadership while retaining a sense of self. She told me in the interview that she liked being "weird" and funny, and that one of her proudest moments in writing the e-mails was when she was able to inject her own personality into the formality of the e-mail:

> Polly: Last night I was just sitting there with Lacey and I was like, "What can I put in there to make this funny?" And I was going to write "I love you all" but I thought no, I can make this funnier: "I love you all with the passion"[pause] of what? Hedgehogs came to mind. What do hedgehogs like? Why, they like running through toilet paper tubes. "I love you all with the passion of a thousand baby hedgehogs running through toilet paper tubes." . . . I told Lacey last night after I sent it that this was the most proud I've ever been of myself.
>
> Faith: Because you felt like what?
>
> Polly: I was proud of my random comment! I was really proud that I came up with the baby hedgehogs. Because who would think of that? But now that it's in your head it's awesome! You look up hedgehogs on YouTube and there's always a toilet paper tube. They love toilet paper tubes.

Polly is proud of both her ability to engage her audience and her ability to do it in a unique way ("who would think of that?"). She is able to take on an organizational persona while retaining her unique sense of self, and the sorority gives her opportunities to do so. In the sorority, Polly can experiment with different rhetorical strategies for addressing gendered leadership expectations, which will likely offer her greater flexibility in future rhetorical situations. In her study of writing transfer, Rebecca Nowacek writes that the transfer of writing skills depends on more than just students recognizing two similar rhetorical contexts and applying the skills learned in one situation to the other situation. Instead, Nowacek argues, transfer "recognizes multiple avenues of connection among contexts, including knowledge, ways of knowing, identities, and goals" (20). One avenue that facilitates transfer is identity, or "an individual's understanding of his or her role, capacities, affiliations, and work in a given social context—as well as that individual's perception of other people's evaluations of his or her role, capacities, affiliation, and worth" (24). So if a student is allowed to try on different kinds of writerly identities within a student organization, she will be able to recognize opportunities for adopting these writerly identities in future rhetorical situations.

The larger question, however, is why Polly bothers. Why is she willing to perform these gendered

literacy practices, faithfully constructing the e-mail every week, even when her writing doesn't always match up with how she feels, even when people don't always pay attention to the e-mails, even when she's frustrated or annoyed?

I believe that Polly is drawn to the sorority because of the opportunity for play and experimentation with the tropes of sorority life. I interviewed her just a few months after she joined the sorority, and she told me she was attracted to its newness:

> Interviewer: What was the first semester in [the sorority] like?
>
> Polly: I had a lot of fun getting everything started and putting ideas together. Originally I thought that being new and having to start everything from scratch would be a bad thing but I actually prefer that. I'm glad I picked that over anything else. I think it's neat that we get to start all the traditions on a specific campus instead of having them picked for you already.

For Polly, leadership is not the crushing responsibility of upholding standards set by someone else, but is a "fun" opportunity to get things started and put ideas together. Anthropologist Anita Harris, a scholar who studies the phenomenon of third-wave feminism in young women's peer communities, suggests that young women have grown disenfranchised with "conventional citizen subject positions" and so seek to create peer-centered communities as a means of trying out a public persona and group identity (482). For example, young women don't see themselves represented in politics: the 2012-2013 congress was over 80% male with an average age of fifty-seven for the House and sixty-two for the Senate (Manning). The opportunities young women do have for political engagement might be in institutionalized, adult-driven forums ("run for student council!"), or through consumerism ("buy organic!"). As a result, Harris finds that young women turn to "alternative ways to express a public self through participation in a peer-constructed community where they can attempt to stake a claim for themselves on their own terms" (485). Sororities and the leadership opportunities they offer are one means for young women to try out this public self and a group identity. Institutionalized as sororities may be, the women perceive them as something they can shape, grow, and craft to suit their own personalities and tastes.

"Not content to settle on a single leadership style, and certainly not content to settle on dominant cultural views of disembodied, authoritarian leadership, she uses rhetorical strategies to test the kind of leader she wants to be: a peer, a goofball, a friend, and a sister."

Polly's strategies taken together (especially the silly and strategic humor) suggest her playful attitude about her leadership position. Her experimentation with different rhetorical strategies suggests that she is playing with the idea of herself as a leader of a sorority. Not content to settle on a single leadership style, and certainly not content to settle on dominant cultural views of disembodied, authoritarian leadership, she uses rhetorical strategies to test the kind of leader she wants to be: a peer, a goofball, a friend, and a sister. Polly's playful and dynamic approach to leadership may be just the kind of leadership necessary for the 21st century. In a 2012 article for the *Harvard Business Review,* Marcus Buckingham notes that corporate leadership training tends to reduce leadership to a

set of characteristics or qualities that can be applied to any situation. Buckingham argues, however, that leaders need to be able to identify, understand, and adapt to a variety of fluid and shifting leadership situations, carefully attuned to the rhetorical needs of the moment. Just as composition teaches students to adapt to their audiences, writing in student organizations can present rhetorical challenges students may not find in the classroom, and their ability to shift and change to face those strategies may be essential for them in the future. In sharing Polly's e-mails with others, I have been surprised at how often a variety of readers—students, academics, professionals—identify with Polly in regard to the challenge of composing documents that balance a tension between the personal and the organizational. As Kathryn Flannery notes, "Composition cannot by itself insure that students will have the time and space to try out a range of intellectual tools," meaning that "it is all the more important—in a Gramscian sense—to insure that all students have access to a range of literacies that they can take up and redeploy in ways beyond their own or our own imaginings" (36-37). Students will need to be able to try on a variety of leadership styles and personalities to understand how each might be appropriate in a different rhetorical situation, and student organizations like sororities offer an exciting space to do so.

NOTES

[1] This research was made possible by a grant from the Creighton Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship. I would like to thank my undergraduate research assistant, Carolyn German, for her help in this analysis.

[2] In an interesting intersection of global and local literacies, the women of the sorority (who were predominantly white) often appropriated this kind of African-American Vernacular English (e.g. "yo" instead of "your"). I did not ask Polly about this choice specifically, but Carolyn noted that this was a means of adding a "voice" to one's writing.

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"A Mockery in the Name of a Barrier": Literacy Test Debates in the Reconstruction Era Congress, 1864-1869

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ABSTRACT

Between 1864 and 1869, the United States Congress debated an educational requirement for voter registration–a literacy test–as a means of dealing with the millions of new American citizens created by emancipation. These debates offer a critical early perspective on the development of literacy as a racial marker serving official racist agendas. Rhetoric supporting a test relied on the premise that a more literate and educated electorate is an obvious and uncontestable cultural good, necessary for the continued health and indeed survival of the nation. When the test was first discussed, its primary advantage was that it offered a way to talk about the inferiority of the newly emancipated Southerners without resorting to racial explanations; thus, freed slaves were dangerous not because they were black but because they were ignorant and uneducated. The 1869 debates about the Fifteenth Amendment, however, reveal a growing awareness of literacy's rhetorical utility and the ways a belief in its inherent "goodness" might be used for ends divorced from the measurement or promotion of literacy: Radical Republicans proposed including a ban on such requirements in the language of the Fifteenth Amendment, certain that Southern whites would use it as a tool of disfranchisement. These debates, in the context of the test's subsequent history as a tool of racist exclusion, demonstrate the rhetorical power and pliability of the idea of literacy within official policy.

KEYWORDS

literacy test; Reconstruction; race; Fifteenth Amendment; suffrage

In the United States Senate chamber, on December 13, 1866, Senator Edgar Cowan, a Republican from Pennsylvania, rose in opposition to the most recent amendment to a suffrage bill in the District of Columbia, in which Connecticut Senator James Dixon proposed that any new voter "shall be able to…read and also write his own name" (USS, "39th Cong., 1st Sess." 84). Cowan imagined a future scenario for his colleagues in which an election board of the dominant party required a demonstration of an ability to write his name and read. A "colored man" coming before them would pass such a test "if he is understood to belong to that party" (101). If he planned to vote for the other party, however,

> what kind of a chance would he have? Then the man of the dominant party who desires to carry the election says, "You shall not only write your name and read it, but you must read generally . . . Now, sir, read generally if you please." "Well," says he, "what shall I read?" Read

> a section of the *Novum Organum* or some other most difficult and abstruse thing, or a few sections from Okie [sic]. Oken's Physiology would be delightful. (101)

The *Congressional Globe* reports that Cowan's narrative elicited "[Laughter.]" (101).

At question was the meaning of "read" in the amendment's language. Was it only an ability to read his own name, or was it, as another Senator claimed, "reading generally" (101)? If the former, Cowan sneered, "this is no barrier at all; this is a mockery in the name of a barrier; this is an insult to those who expect barriers" (101). If the latter, Cowan offered his example to point out the obvious shortcomings of "reading generally" as an assessment benchmark: "where is the precision, where is it to begin and where is it to end, and who shall determine its limits? I tremble for my sable brother when I reflect that he may be at the mercy of some political board in this respect" (101). Cowan's derision of an intelligence qualification came 24 years before Mississippi added a literacy test as a suffrage qualification during its 1890 Constitutional Convention, some version of which became a standard feature of Southern state constitutions by 1910.

In August 1964, almost 100 years after Cowan produced his hypothetical narrative, Unita Blackwell, a 31-year-old African American and budding civil rights activist, made her first attempt to register to vote at the Issaquena County Courthouse in the Mississippi Delta.[1] Under Mississippi law, Blackwell had to "read and interpret" a section of the Mississippi State Constitution by transcribing and paraphrasing it in writing. The Issaquena County Clerk, Mary Vandevender, chose Section 182 for Blackwell:

> The power to tax any corporations and their property shall never be surrendered or abridged by any contract or grant to which the state or any political subdivision thereof may be a party, except that the legislature may grant exemption from taxation in the encouragement of manufactures and other new enterprises of public utility extending for a period of not exceeding five years, the time of such exemptions to commence from the date of charter, if to a corporation; and if to an individual enterprise, then from the commencement of work; but when the legislature grants such exemptions for a period of five years or less, it shall be done by general laws, which shall distinctly enumerate the classes of manufactures and other new enterprises of public utility entitled to such questions, and shall prescribe the mode and manner in which the rights to such exemptions shall be determined. (Qtd. in USCCR 29-30)

Blackwell failed that test, and the next, passing only on her third try, when the county courthouse had become the center of a federal civil rights investigation. That investigation revealed that in the three years prior to Blackwell's attempts, 107 of the 133 whites who applied to register were given one of these three sections from the Mississippi Constitution to transcribe and paraphrase:

> *Section 8.* All persons, resident in this state, citizens of the United States, are hereby declared citizens of the State of Mississippi.
>
> *Section 35.* The senate shall consist of members chosen every four years by the qualified electors of the several districts.
>
> *Section 240.* All elections by the people shall be by ballot. (Qtd. in USCCR 48-49)

All of the 133 white applicants passed their literacy requirement. Out of 90 African Americans who

attempted to register between July 1964 and February 1965, nine succeeded, making them the only nine registered African Americans in Issaquena County, where blacks made up 68% of the almost 3,000 residents.

Such a "mockery in the name of a barrier" reflected predictions made by the US Congress in debates occurring between 1864 and 1869, when legislators regularly discussed the literacy test in the context of Reconstruction following Emancipation and the Civil War. I explore these debates in detail in this essay. The test—which both Connecticut and Massachusetts had required since the mid-1850s—first appeared in these debates as a device that might mitigate against the perceived "ignorance" of the recently enslaved Southerners, an ignorance portrayed as a threat to the purity of the ballot-box and the Republic in general. Senator Dixon, and others, defended the educational requirement by arguing that, while an ability to read and write might not be proof enough of intelligence, certainly an *inability* to read and write was, in general, evidence enough that a person was not prepared to vote responsibly and intelligently. But these debates, as Cowan's narrative suggests, went beyond familiar arguments about the negative consequences of illiteracy and the cultural benefits of literacy. By the time Congress entertained the idea of banning literacy tests completely in the text of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869, they had fully articulated an understanding of the test as easily manipulable, capable of disfranchising or enfranchising citizens based on race while seeming to do so on the basis of literate ability. And so Cowan sarcastically imagined a script that, a century later, Unita Blackwell and Mary Vandevender actually performed, albeit with a different "most difficult and abstruse" text.

"By the time Congress entertained the idea of banning literacy tests completely in the text of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869, they had fully articulated an understanding of the test as easily manipulable, capable of disfranchising or enfranchising citizens based on race while seeming to do so on the basis of literate ability."

These congressional debates, I argue in this essay, offer a critical perspective on the development of literacy as a racial marker serving official racist agendas. I begin by historically contextualizing the debates in relation to one of the dominant challenges in the Reconstruction South, the meaning of citizenship for the recently freed Southerners (and for anyone else in the South, and eventually the nation, with African ancestry). I then offer a rhetoric of the literacy test, as it appears in these debates. A primary aspect of that rhetoric was the incontrovertible goodness of literacy. Speakers relied on the premise that a more literate and educated electorate is an obvious and uncontestable cultural good, necessary for the continued health and indeed survival of the nation. Conversely, arguments against the literacy test can seem to be arguments against that premise. Literacy's beneficent glow was such that it could distract from one of the other primary features of the rhetoric of the test, the way in which it could reframe discussion away from racial categories. When the test was first discussed, its primary advantage was that it offered a way to talk about the inferiority of the nation's newest citizens without resorting to racial explanations; by this argument, the freed slaves were dangerous not because they were black but because they were ignorant and uneducated. Literate ability became nearly synonymous with race, useful as a way of describing a population in other than racial terms, making this one of the moments that "literacy has been accepted as White property in crucial contexts that helped

shape the country" (Prendergast 7). The future survival of the literacy test depended upon these rhetorical associations, which scholars and teachers of literacy will recognize as remarkably resilient.

More than outlining these themes, however, these debates finally reveal an awareness of literacy's rhetorical utility and the ways a belief in its inherent "goodness" might be used for ends divorced from the measurement or promotion of literacy. The means by which a test could do this were precisely identified, as were the motivations of Southern governments for requiring such a qualification. No one doubted Southern whites would attempt to disfranchise African Americans, and the debates demonstrate that Congress knew the literacy test could do it. Given such total transparency, a transparency that lasted for the test's entire political life, how could the test prove so durable? That durability, I argue, stems in large part from the power of literacy's associations.

I am not arguing here that these congressional debates fundamentally shaped the national discourse on literacy tests, nor that Congress created new rhetorics surrounding literacy and race. There is significant evidence in the historical record of a fairly robust national conversation about the literacy test during this period, and central rhetorical principles in these debates—such as the determined linkage between literate capacity and racial descriptions—were well-trodden by the mid-nineteenth century and in fact enforced by antebellum laws banning literacy education for slaves. But these debates remain the most comprehensive available discussion of the literacy test in the nineteenth century, at least until 1890. The final wording of the Fifteenth Amendment allowed for exactly the exclusions predicted by supporters of a stronger amendment, and so the Fifteenth Amendment breathed life into a test that, by most indications, was nearly obsolete even in the two states—Connecticut and Massachusetts—where it had been constitutionally mandated just a decade earlier.

Here, I will not chronicle the origins of the literacy test, though some context is necessary. To my knowledge, the earliest appearance in American political discourse of the literacy test as a voting requirement was in the 1842 *A Treatise on the Rights of Suffrage* by Samuel Jones. Jones, a Massachusetts lawyer, recommended an educational qualification as a means of addressing a sudden demographic crisis in American politics, the increase of immigrants (all of them, but particularly the Irish) that was starting to affect society and politics, especially in New England. While proposals for an educational qualification as a means of restricting the immigrant vote appeared in New Jersey and New York Constitutional Conventions in the 1840s, such a qualification first appeared on state constitutions in Massachusetts in 1855 and Connecticut in 1857, both under the leadership of Know-Nothing politicians who rode to power largely on the basis of hysteria about immigrants taking over control of the body politic. By Reconstruction, then, the rhetorical potential of literacy as a means of excluding a threatening Other from the political sphere already had two decades of history in the United States—indeed, in the early twentieth century and even today in discourse about immigration, a lack of literate ability is often represented as one of the threats immigrants pose socially and politically.

SCHOLARSHIP ON THE LITERACY TEST

"Despite its infamy," John Wertheimer noted in his discussion of the 1959 Supreme Court

decision in *Lassiter v. Northampton Board of Electors*, "the test has been subject to surprisingly little close scholarly scrutiny" (138). In composition and literacy studies, it has been occasionally mentioned as a way of providing context for a related discussion (see, for example, discussions of the literacy test in Kates; Prendergast), but almost no analysis beyond that. In the literacy test's early history, political scientists analyzed it—typically favorably—on occasion (see for example Bromage; Hart), and legal scholars and politicians wrote occasionally about the test during the civil rights movement (see, for example, Avins, "The Fifteenth Amendment"; Ervin). My own interest in the topic emerged when I wrote about the Citizenship Schools founded by the Highlander Folk School in 1957 (Branch) and looked for, and could not find, adequate scholarly sources to contextualize the literacy tests the Citizenship Schools were designed to contest.

Within the field of literacy studies, perhaps the most detailed examination of the literacy tests appears in Edward Stevens' *Literacy, Law, and Social Order.* Stevens focuses particularly on the political and legal history of the tests, highlighting the ways in which federal courts—even as they occasionally struck down obviously discriminatory practices by particular states—supported the constitutional right of states to set their own electoral laws, including an educational qualification. He notes that the central question raised by literacy tests—"at what level did the attribute of literacy need to exist to enable the application of native intelligence to decisions of self-governance?" (84) — was never addressed; that is, no one could define at what point the acquisition of literacy allowed for good citizenship. "Ironically," he notes, "the abuse of the literacy test was made easier by the absence of any well-founded measure of function and competence," an absence he accounts for because "[t]he ideal of a literate, self-governing population often operated at the level of ideology, not the level of function" (85).

The test, that is, reaffirmed a commonplace about the necessity of an educated and literate population to the health of the republic; as Senator Cowan demonstrated also, the fact that there was no clear idea of how literate a person or a population needed to be for that health, and that there was thus no adequate standard for measuring literacy, actually helped the test achieve its purposes —of disfranchisement in particular—more effectively. Stevens finishes his examination with questions he identifies as outside the scope of his study about the relationships "between citizenship rights on the one hand and literacy and education on the other" (87). He asks, "To what extent are these relationships dependent and independent, singular or plural? Can the ideological and the functional be separated? Should they be?" (87-88). In some ways, a version of this question lies at the heart of the congressional debates: the test addresses an ideological problem with a functional solution.

In a brief discussion of the literacy tests, Shirley Brice Heath notes that "[t]hough public use of literacy as a test of character and political participation has been struck down by the courts, the question remains whether or not the attitudes which established these tests remain in other cultural spheres—specifically in English classes and in the educational system at large" (37-38). [2] Heath's main concern is exploring the question of why we might teach writing at all, and her discussion of the literacy tests appears as an example of cultural attachments to literacy that have been used to answer that question within schools. But the transparency of the attitudes that established the tests indicates an early awareness of the ideological function of literacy to reaffirm notions of racial

difference and separation.

Tabitha Adkins argues that, since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, "literacy tests came to serve as a trope for discrimination disguised as bureaucracy" (82) in the arguments and decisions of the Supreme Court. In several post-1965 court cases, she notes, justices have invoked the literacy test to represent the discrimination that required particular sanctions in voting districts with such a test. In the recent Supreme Court case declaring Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional, Adkins notes, Justice Stephen Breyer referred to literacy tests as a symptom of "the disease [that] is still there in [Alabama]" (qtd. in Adkins 83). The reversal of Section 5 and the current approaches to limiting enfranchisement—through laws regarding voter identification and reduced registration and polling opportunities—are reminders that the impetus behind the literacy test in American suffrage law still plays a central role in American politics.

There has been more scholarly discussion of the literacy tests put in place to restrict immigration to the United States, especially at the federal level. Jeanne Petit explores Progressive Era literacy testing for immigrants, focused on race as well as "ideologies of manhood, womanhood, and sexuality" as tools for marking immigrants as safe or unsafe for citizenship (11). Constance Theado examines ideologies around literacy and literacy testing for immigrants between 1892 and 1917, arguing that literacy became understood, and continues to be understood, as a marker of what it means to be an American. Tricia Serviss analyzes the literacy testing of immigrants in New York between 1923 and 1946, arguing that by "expanding constructs governing literacy and writing assessment" (226), local assessors resisted the mandates of standardized evaluation directives.[3] However, though the test is part of the common knowledge of the civil rights movement, the history, development, and debates about the literacy test as a tool of African-American disfranchisement have been largely overlooked.

Catherine Prendergast, in *Literacy and Racial Justice*, offers the most sustained exploration of the legal concept of literacy and race within the field of composition studies. Her work—focused on the twentieth century and *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* and subsequent court decisions in particular—reveals the ways that courts understood literacy as a property of whiteness, extending Cheryl Harris's discussion about "whiteness as property" (Harris 1714). Her study highlights the ways that legal decisions, especially regarding educational policy, understood African-American literacy as posing a threat to the literacy of white Americans who "have acted as if something has been taken away from them when the goods of literacy are redistributed" (Prendergast 8). The literacy test, especially as it enters the discussion of suffrage law after the Emancipation Proclamation, trucked on literacy as a property of whiteness, part of a slate of properties—including of course almost all the physical property—that distinguished whites from African Americans for decfades following the Civil War. Prendergast's study demonstrates the social and legal power of that association, arguing that major twentieth-century Supreme Court cases dealing with racial justice, including but especially following *Brown v. Board of Education*, were predicated on something like a fear of the racial redistribution of literacy.

Close attention to the actual test, however, provides a critical perspective on the history of official literacy policy in the United States. From its beginning, advocates for an educational qualification for

voting relied on beliefs about literacy's connection to productive citizenship that typically covered baser political motivations focused on disfranchising populations likely to vote for a different party. This tension—between a belief in the inherent goodness of literacy and its actual functions in particular contexts—appears regularly in official educational and social discourses and has been a primary focus of my earlier scholarship. That this test was used consequentially for three-quarters of a century to disfranchise a significant population of Americans—in many cases the majorities of particular Southern states—means that leveraging this tension has played a central role in American history.

While I cannot claim the test created associations between race and literacy, it certainly relied on them and reaffirmed them in its creation, meaning that the test also can be read as a technology that bolstered "literacy" and "illiteracy" as racial markers. A close history of the test demonstrates concretely how discussions of literacy supported ethnic and racial oppression under the guise of promoting an ideal of better citizenship. The history of this test puts literacy in the center of some of the most enduring themes in American political and legal history: Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, states' rights, and so forth. The history of the test also sheds light on the on-going uses of literacy testing in the United States—though no longer used for access to voting, standardized tests of literacy continue to have high-stakes consequences. Likewise, as voting restrictions are more widespread in recent years, renewed attention to the history of electoral manipulation becomes even more urgent.

THE RECONSTRUCTION CONGRESS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW[4]

> No matter where [congressional argument] started, and how far afield in legal metaphysics it strayed, always it returned and had to return to two focal points: Shall the South be rewarded for unsuccessful secession by increased political power; and: Can the freed Negro be a part of American democracy?
>
> —W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (267)

I offer here the briefest of historical contexts for these congressional debates, which occurred during one of the most contentious and controversial periods in American history, and I limit my overview to the legislative issues in which the literacy test was most commonly discussed. The literacy test appeared in congressional debates in the aftermath of the Civil War during arguments about representation for Southern states and about whether and how African Americans could be allowed to vote. The issue of representation hinged on the sudden transformation of millions of blacks from slave to citizen, or in the terms of the United States Constitution, from 3/5th to 5/5th of a person. For means of determining seats in the House of Representatives, this amounted on paper to a dramatic population increase for Southern states, and with it the possibility of a return to Congress with more power than they had before the Civil War. The place of African Americans in the democracy, then, was intrinsically linked to a desire to check that potential increase in Southern power, either by somehow limiting state representation or by requiring former

Confederate states to enfranchise their newest citizens as a condition of re-entry to the Union.

In early April 1862, the federal government emancipated slaves in the District of Columbia, seven months before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Because it was directly under the jurisdiction of Congress, the District became a proving ground for Reconstruction policy, and debates about suffrage in D.C. were some of the earliest discussions of full male suffrage from the era. Reform of D.C. suffrage was discussed as early as 1864, but the most serious debates came in the House in early 1866 and the Senate in late 1866. As with almost everywhere else in the United States, in D.C. the prospect of full male suffrage—Negro suffrage—was deeply unpopular (an unpopularity, of course, demonstrated by the ballots of registered white voters). Still, in December 1866 Congress granted full male suffrage in the District and overrode President Johnson's veto in January 1867, with all parties aware that the vote would likely serve as a precursor to broader suffrage reform. The literacy test appeared often in these debates.

Also in 1866, the balance of power in the federal government shifted considerably as the contours of Presidential Reconstruction became clearer. President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's Democratic Vice-President, shocked Republicans in Congress by vetoing the Freedmen's Bureau Act and the Civil Rights Act early in 1866, repudiating not only the specifics of the policies but also their larger suggestion that the federal government should take the lead in protecting the civil rights of African Americans. Republicans in Congress responded by passing, after acrimonious debate, the Fourteenth Amendment. Under the Fourteenth Amendment, eligible males denied the right to vote could not be counted towards representation. In effect, the amendment made disfranchisement on the basis of race legal, even if it would entail particular limits on representation. Under the Fourteenth Amendment, such disfranchisement would have little effect on Northern state representation and potentially dramatic consequences in the South. Johnson, not surprisingly, opposed the amendment as an overly punitive overreach of federal power.

Following the congressional elections of 1866, however, the Radical Republicans became empowered in what shaped into an epic battle with President Johnson. Opposed to black suffrage, granting amnesty to thousands of former Confederate leaders, and seemingly unconcerned about allowing Southern states to return to the Union with increased political power, Johnson represented the antithesis of Radical Republican ideas. Johnson's widely maligned campaign antics proved a boon to the political fortune of Radical Republicans, who gained a veto-proof majority and, even before the newly elected Congressmen had been sworn in, immediately passed a bill declaring full male suffrage in the District of Columbia, passing the law on December 14, 1866, and overturning Johnson's angry veto at the end of January 1867. Soon thereafter, Congress granted full male suffrage to the territories.

In March 1866, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act (also overriding Johnson's veto), requiring as a condition of re-admittance that Southern states write new constitutions guaranteeing the vote to African Americans and also that the Southern states ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. Notably, Northern states were not required to enfranchise black voters, a double standard that opponents of the Act called hypocritical. When African-American suffrage in the North became a central issue in state and special elections in 1867, the political tide turned against the Radical

Republicans, reflecting the enormous national unpopularity (again, among registered voters) of giving the vote to African Americans. During the 1868 Presidential campaign, Republicans left a call for national black suffrage out of their party platform—"it was a double-faced thing," Democratic Senator James Doolittle proclaimed the next year; "it looked with a black face to the South and a white face to the North" (USS, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 1012). Though they won the presidency with Ulysses Grant in 1868, Republicans lost seats in the House of Representatives. Republicans in general realized that their political future depended in part upon African-American suffrage. And so, soon after the 1868 elections, Republican newspapers and politicians began calling for a Fifteenth Amendment that would secure full male suffrage. As *The Press* in Philadelphia wrote, "where the colored men vote, there the cause of Republicanism is entirely safe, and will be" (qtd. in Gillette 43).

When Congress began to debate the Fifteenth Amendment in January 1869, its intent to enfranchise African Americans was already clear. By that time, legally if not in actual practice, African Americans were enfranchised in the South, and the Fifteenth Amendment sought to nationalize that, for reasons both politically pragmatic and ideologically driven. At the same time, the deep unpopularity of granting Negro suffrage made Republicans wary of passing an amendment that states would refuse to ratify.

Representative George Boutwell, a Massachusetts Republican, introduced the first version of the Fifteenth Amendment on January 11, 1869; in it the critical language stipulated that "the right of any citizen of the United States to vote shall not be abridged by the United States or any State by reason of race, color, or previous condition of slavery of any citizen or class of citizens of the United States" (USHR, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 286). Language proposed by Ohio Republican Samuel Shellabarger that would have effectively abolished educational and property qualifications and permanently disfranchised all ex-Confederates was rejected by the House, which passed Boutwell's version on January 30, 1869.

Beginning on January 28, the Senate also debated its own version, which they dropped after Boutwell's amendment passed the House. Democrats—who had no power to stop the amendment—strongly opposed Negro suffrage using arguments about racial inferiority and the constitutional right of states to determine their own suffrage law. More consequentially, Republicans split as well, some seeking stronger measures that would disallow property or educational qualifications. Senator Henry Wilson, a Massachusetts Republican, offered the strongest version in the Senate, abolishing all qualifications for voting on the basis of "race, color, nativity, property, or religious belief." After a debate of thirty-two consecutive hours, a version of Wilson's amendment—one that would have permanently abolished the literacy test—passed the Senate on February 9, 1869. The House, however, rejected Wilson's language, and the Senate reconvened, returning to the original language it had taken up on January 28, which focused only on "race, color, or previous condition of slavery" as conditions that could not be used for disfranchisement, which the Senate passed on February 17. But then the House passed its own new version, this time banning nativity, property, and creed (but not education) as potential voting disqualifications. The Fifteenth Amendment went to a conference committee with three Representatives and three Senators, who returned with what would become

the final language: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any other State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The House, on February 25, and the Senate, on February 26, passed the final version.

The ratification process provided further drama. The amendment clearly advantaged Republicans in states with significant African-American populations, and all Western states except Nevada rejected it, reflecting concerns over the potential political power of Chinese immigrants. In general, Alexander Keyssar notes, opposition to the amendment and the stronger language rejected by Congress during the process of debate and ratification came from a desire to preserve a means of limiting suffrage among various populations, including "the increasingly visible clusters of illiterate and semi-literate workers massing in the nation's cities" (81). Nevertheless, by mid-February 1870, the amendment had been ratified by two thirds of the states.

Had Wilson's language been accepted in the Fifteenth Amendment, Kousser notes, "it is difficult to see what permanent means of suffrage limitation those who wished to eliminate poor and uneducated groups from the electorate could have employed" (56-57). The urgent compromises required to pass the Fifteenth Amendment left open the possibility that a literacy test could be added to registration requirements in the future. As I point out in the next section, Radical Republicans in Congress never doubted that such an opportunity would be eagerly seized to ensure the disfranchisement of the South's newest voters.

THE LITERACY TEST GOES TO WASHINGTON

In this section, I explore two primary aspects of the rhetoric of the literacy test. First, the rhetoric of the test relied on the positive associations of literacy, what Harvey J. Graff calls "the literacy myth." The literacy test supported the impossible-to-argue-against premise that a more educated electorate would create a stronger democracy. These associations proved so strong and enduring that they could prop up the literacy test even when its primary purpose as a tool of racist disfranchisement was never in doubt. Second, the rhetoric of the literacy test allowed for a discussion of race to occur without using racial terms. Literate ability—being literate or illiterate—became a characteristic that covered for the racial fears exacerbated by emancipation and Reconstruction. The long-term and highly effectual presence of the literacy test in American history, then, should be understood as an extraordinary example of the rhetorical power of the idea of literacy, which offered a means, in the words of Benjamin Tillman, a prominent South Carolina Democrat who worked to add a literacy requirement to the state's 1895 post-Reconstruction constitution, to "get around the Chinese wall, the impassable bulwark which the Fifteenth Amendment throws around the negroes" (*Journal of the Constitutional Convention* 468).

"A received and incontrovertible maxim": Literacy as an inarguable good

By attaching itself to accepted cultural truths about the value of education and intelligence in a democracy, the literacy test relied on arguments so difficult to dispute that they could trump the fact that, at least as a Jim Crow institution, the test's actual function to disfranchise African Americans

was never in doubt. Senator Waitman Willey, in July 1866 debates about suffrage in D.C., stated the relationship in representative fashion: "It is a received and incontrovertible maxim that free institutions are only safe in the hands of intelligent people" (USS, "39th Cong., 1st Sess." 3438). In vetoing full male suffrage in D.C. in January 1867, President Johnson likewise affirmed that point with the sort of pious language that often surrounded abstract discussions of suffrage: "when guided by virtue, intelligence, patriotism, and a proper appreciation of our institutions," the exercise of the franchise was the foundation of democracy, but "if exercised by persons who do not justly estimate its value and who are indifferent as to its results, it . . . must eventuate in the complete destruction of that liberty of which it should be the most powerful conservator" (USS, "39th Cong., 2nd Sess." 304). This sort of trumpeting of literacy's intrinsic benefits, of course, is a mainstay of discourse on literacy; I have written in the past about the ways that correctional education and vocational education, for example, rely on such commonplaces about literacy to promote broader social and institutional agendas (see Branch, *Eyes*). Again and again, this idea is affirmed and restated; because of its obvious cultural powers, even opponents of the literacy test had to somehow address the premise.

"The idea of literacy, however, created a powerful cover for the test's racist agenda: the rhetorical principle about education and citizenship that the literacy test forwarded seemed self-evident. Until it was finally banned in 1965, what the test actually did could be shielded by the values it seemed to project."

If support of the literacy test could be framed as an argument for a more educated electorate, arguing against the test could seem to sanction the opposite premise, that there was little value in a more educated electorate. When in February 1869 the Senate passed the version of the Fifteenth Amendment banning any sort of educational qualification, reactions in the press emphasized exactly that potential. *The Nation* reported favorably, in general, about the Senate draft, except for "the provision forbidding any State, no matter what its circumstances or its experiences, to demand of any of its citizens an educational qualification for the exercise of the franchise" ("Suffrage" 101). Such a provision was a "step backward," not in regard to how it might operate, but because its passage would amount to "a solemn national declaration, made by the most progressive people in the world, that intelligence is of no importance in politics, and that a 'brute vote' ought to count for as much as a human one" (101). *Harper's Weekly* took a more ambivalent stance about the proposed ban on an educational qualification, suggesting that it was unlikely "that [a condition of education for the suffrage] would not be imposed in the Southern states if opportunity were offered," given that "every kind of effort will be made [there] to avoid a practical political reality" (131). Still, their editorial fretted about the message the ban might send: "It may be very easy to evade any practical test of a voter's education, but is it, therefore, wise that the country should seem to think that ignorance is not harmful in a voter?" (131). Here, while acknowledging that attempts to disfranchise African Americans were almost certain to occur and that a literacy test was likely to become a useful tool to that effect, *Harper's Weekly* focused on the broad and untenable position that a ban might "seem" to promote. For both *The Nation* and *Harper's Weekly*, banning the literacy

test would send a dangerous message, which mattered regardless of the actual purposes of the test.

In some ways, the story Cowan told on the floor of the Senate in 1865, and the story Unita Blackwell lived out in the Issaquena County Courthouse in 1964, are connected by this principle. How could a voting qualification—whose uses were predicted and enumerated decades before they were actually enacted; whose reason for existing was loudly and repeatedly declared when Southern states rewrote their Reconstruction-era constitutions; that commentators, politicians, and judges all understood to make practically possible what had been legally proscribed—how could that test fulfill its purpose for three quarters of a century? The primary reason, most likely, is that the test enforced a racial exclusion that few white Americans, for most of American history, were willing to challenge. The idea of literacy, however, created a powerful cover for the test's racist agenda: the rhetorical principle about education and citizenship that the literacy test forwarded seemed self-evident. Until it was finally banned in 1965, what the test actually did could be shielded by the values it seemed to project.

"Strike out the word 'white'": Literacy as a cover for race

Another critical aspect of the rhetoric of the literacy test lies in the ways that descriptions of literate ability became used to replace racial terms. Until the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, this rhetorical move allowed for the sudden problem posed to the nation by four million new citizens to be described not in terms of race but in terms of cognitive and intellectual ability. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, the rhetorical capacity of literacy to cover for race became legally necessary.

The earliest mention of the literacy test during the Reconstruction debates in Congress came in the spring of 1864 when the Civil War was grinding down, with a United States Senate comprised only of Union states, during debates about suffrage in the District of Columbia. In this brief and unresolved discussion, literate ability appeared, quickly and easily, as an explicit replacement for race, reflecting contemporary understandings of racial difference that associated blackness with ignorance and whiteness with intelligence. In connection with emancipation, a central discourse of literacy shifted. Whereas literate slaves in the antebellum South represented a threat that must be legislated against, now the legislative anxiety addressed illiterate former slaves. The literacy test offered a useful rhetorical framework for new policy directed toward that social danger, by allowing legislation responding to racial fears to appear as legislation promoting an obvious social good. The future of the literacy test depended upon that rhetorical substitution of literate ability for race.

On May 6, 1864, Senator James Dixon offered an amendment to Senate Bill 114, "An Act to continue, alter, or amend the charter of the city of Washington," particularly designed "to preserve the purity of elections and guard against the abuse of the elective franchise" in the District of Columbia. Dixon's amendment, a minor bureaucratic addition, quickly passed; immediately after its passage, Senator Cowan proposed another amendment to Section 1 of the same bill, "by inserting the word 'white' before the word 'male,' so as to confine the right of voting in Washington to white male citizens" (USS, "38th Cong., 1st Sess." 2140).[5] Cowan believed that offering the franchise to "semi-barbarous and uneducated negroes, many of whom have just emerged from slavery" (2140), would

be too radical a step to take in the midst of the Civil War. And he claimed that African Americans would vote as a bloc, referencing the rise of the Know-Nothing Party and its anti-Irish Catholic rhetoric to contextualize his anxiety: "we all remember, that but a few years ago a powerful party was formed in this country which charged this offense upon foreigners, and especially those of them who belonged to a particular religious faith" (2141). When Charles Sumner, the Radical Republican from Massachusetts, countered that "the colored voters have divided at the polls" in his state (2141), Cowan responded by noting that Massachusetts had "very few negroes" and that "There is a further reason why I suppose there is no difficulty experienced in Massachusetts in regard to negro voting; that is that there all electors must be able to read, which would still further limit the mischief" (2141-42). Here appears what I believe to be the first mention of the literacy test within the United States Congress.

Cowan's introduction of the literacy test into the debate reframed the discussion away from exploring categories of race and toward a discussion of qualifications of voters, the foremost being, according to Waitman Willey, a Republican from West Virginia, "intelligence, capacity to understand how to exercise this great duty" (2141). Willey reminded the chamber of the law in Connecticut which "represents that no person, either white or black, . . . is entitled to exercise the right of suffrage unless he can read and write" (2141). The discussion was tabled until May 12, at which time Senator Lot Morrill, a Republican from Maine, sought to make two changes to Cowan's suggested amendment. The first change slightly modified the tax requirement; the second added a requirement that a voter be able to "read and write with facility" (2239). When the Senate President sought clarification about the Cowan's addition of the word 'white' before 'male,' Willey declared his intent "To strike out the word 'white'" (2239). Apart from a minor loosening of the tax requirement, that is, Morrill's proposed amendment is a straightforward substitution of "literate" for "white."

That substitution, of course, was possible only in relation to the grafting of illiteracy onto blackness, a process that took two primary forms in these debates. In both cases, arguing not in terms of color but in terms of what that color represented—not about whiteness but about an ability to read and write with facility, not about blackness but about illiteracy and ignorance—provided a way to specify a racial threat in non-racial terms. One argument—a typical racist formulation of the time, promoted by the era's top scientists—held that blacks were biologically incapable of the type of intelligence that would make them qualified voters. So, Representative Benjamin Boyer, a Pennsylvania Democrat, when the House debated D.C. suffrage in January 1866, argued that the reason to exclude "the negro" from voting was not on account of his blackness or "long heels and wooly hair" or "because the bones in his cranium are thick and inclose [sic] a brain averaging by measurement fewer cubic inches in volume than the skulls of white Americans" (USHR, "39th Cong., 1st Sess." 177). Such physical characteristics, Boyer argued,

> are the outward badges of a race by nature inferior in mental caliber, and lacking that vim, pluck, and poise of character which give some force and direction to human enterprise, and which are essential to the safety and progress of popular institutions . . . An educated negro is a negro still. The cunning chisel of a Canova could not make an enduring Corinthian column out of a block of anthracite; not because of its color, but on account of the structure

of its substance. (177)

Critically, arguments such as Boyer's justified racist public policy not on the basis of something as seemingly arbitrary as those "outward badges," but because of innate and irredeemable biological differences. The racial differences that mattered were internal. Proponents of this view categorically rejected African-American enfranchisement as dangerous to the future of the nation, because blackness symbolized an intellectual deficit that could never be overcome.

Stated in other terms, however, those "outward badges" could symbolize a deficit that was—at least in part—a by-product of history. Blackness still represented ignorance, but rather than being racially inherent, that condition had been determined by the institution of slavery. In the discussion following Morrill's proposal to "strike out the word 'white,'" Senator Lafayette Foster, a Connecticut Republican, argued against "color" as "a sensible or reasonable test of that or of any political right whatever. I think the proper test is intelligence and sufficient moral character" (USS, "38th Cong., 1st Sess." 2240). He articulated the association between race and literacy directly: "[T]he great mass of blacks who are in this District, certainly those who have recently come into it, are by no means qualified to [vote]. If we insist either upon intelligence or upon moral character, they would probably be wanting in both" (2240). While those blacks should not be blamed for those shortcomings, Foster argued that their ignorance was dangerous anyway: "Still, though they have been abused and shut out from the light of knowledge, they should not be allowed to exercise a right that they are not qualified to exercise, by way of compensation. That would be punishing those who are not to blame for the faults and crimes of others" (2240). Likewise, Senator Morton Wilkinson, a Republican from Minnesota, supported Morrill's amendment, noting that "I am well aware many of [the freed slaves] will be incompetent to vote on account of the wicked and pernicious influence which slavery has had upon them" (2241). This argument supporting the test shifted the topic away from race as an "outward badge" of inferiority and towards an internal characteristic and capacity that had been historically conditioned. Here, the primary threat was not African-American voters, but ignorant ones. Though a literacy test would certainly disfranchise a "great mass of blacks," it would not be on account of their blackness.

Supporters of the literacy test used a cultural commonplace about African Americans—that they were ignorant and uneducated, whether by nature or through history—and turned it into a political technology of disfranchisement. Using an inability to read and write as a measure of ignorance supplied a rhetorical distance from racial categories, a distance that would become legally necessary after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. That rhetorical move reflected earlier ones made in the Connecticut and Massachusetts constitutions, which used a literacy test to guard against a variety of threats posed by the surge of recent immigrants (especially, perhaps, their tendency to vote for Democratic candidates). And it reaffirmed the distinction made into law in the antebellum Southern states that literacy is an attribute of whiteness that did not belong to blacks in the same way and so could be used to enforce a distinction that remained based in race. For the history of the literacy test, this replacement of the modifier "white" with "who can read and write with facility" should be recognized as a rhetorically important moment, even if its quick appearance in the debate confirms that it was already a broad cultural association. A rhetorical maneuver already

familiar from the anti-immigrant hysteria of the 1850s was directed toward another and now more threatening population. Following the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, when states could no longer restrict suffrage on the basis of race, those who opposed African-American suffrage in the strong terms of Benjamin Boyer above could no longer legally justify disfranchisement on the basis of inherent racial inferiority. The literacy test reappeared as a standard aspect of Jim Crow disfranchisement because it allowed for a way to talk about race without referring to race. The words "white" and "negro" could both be struck from the discourse, replaced, respectively, with synonyms for "literate" and "ignorant." As I indicate in the next section, the congressional debates demonstrate a wide awareness that the idea of literacy itself lent itself to this sort of manipulation.

RESISTING THE RHETORIC OF THE LITERACY TEST

As Cowan's narrative in the introduction indicates, the rhetoric supporting the literacy test in the congressional debates was never uncontested. Opponents of the literacy test resisted it for a variety of reasons, even though they were often, like Cowan, not in support of full male suffrage. Many voiced concerns about the ways a literacy test might impact already enfranchised whites (a central concern of Southern states' constitutional conventions beginning in 1890), while others deemed unjust a law that might disfranchise Union Civil War veterans. Some simply could not stomach African-American suffrage with any conditions attached. Until the debate about the Fifteenth Amendment, however, arguments in Congress focused primarily on the merits of using a literacy test as a filter for the electorate. During debates about the Fifteenth Amendment, those who argued that the literacy test should be banned did so in favor of full male suffrage and depicted the literacy test as an open threat to that end goal. In so doing, they articulated fully the rhetoric of the literacy test, demonstrating how it could (and in fact would) be manipulated to achieve the goal of African-American disfranchisement.

These arguments specifically worked against the two primary rhetorical supports of the literacy test. In response to the seemingly inarguable benefit of a more educated electorate, supporters of a constitutional ban on the literacy test pointed out the ways that education had been legally proscribed in the antebellum South. If literacy were to become a requirement for voting, Southern states would have further impetus to limit educational opportunities for African Americans. The inherent and obvious good of literacy, then, might be used instead to sustain educational inequity. In response to the use of literacy as a replacement for race, supporters of the constitutional ban pointed out how easily such a test could be manipulated to exclude only particular categories of people.

The outlines of these arguments were already visible from earlier Reconstruction debates. When Congress first explored the literacy test as a potential voting requirement in the District of Columbia in May 1864, some opponents, like Cowan, believed that any possibility of African Americans voting would be dangerous. Others, like Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson, the test's most determined congressional opponent in 1869, argued against any restriction that might disfranchise present voters or veterans who had fought in the Civil War. But by January of 1866, when full male suffrage for the District of Columbia was taken up again in the House of Representatives, proponents

had begun responding more directly to arguments, like Boyer's above, that blackness was but the "outward badge" of inherent intellectual inferiority, as well as those, like Wilkinson's, that supported a literacy test because of the historically enforced ignorance of slaves. Representative Glenni Scofield, a Pennsylvania Republican, focused on a contradiction at the heart of arguments that relied on the educational level of African Americans to support either full or partial disfranchisement:

> The forbidding statutes of the South attest the capacity of the negro. If they really believed his mind was so feeble, why bind it with such heavy chains? If he was incapable of learning, why prohibit it with the penitentiary? Their theories proved he was weak, but their legislation acknowledged he was strong. They debased him by law to fit him for slavery, and justified slavery because he was debased. (USHR, "39th Cong., 1st Sess." 180)

Scofield articulated a circular process by which an ignorance legally and deliberately constructed to deny power to slaves is rhetorically transformed into a justification for continuing to deny power to a class of former slaves. Disfranchisement on the basis of ignorance, then, instead of creating a more educated electorate, offered an incentive for continued educational inequity. Representative Pike, arguing about the literacy test during a January 1866 debate about the basis of representation in the House of Representatives, offered a particular hypothetical situation:

> [S]uppose that after adopting this educational qualification, [a state] should fail to provide that these people whom we now know to be ignorant, shall hereafter be educated, should simply let them severely alone? Or suppose that they interpose such restrictions by indirect laws as to practically prevent them from being educated. (407)

A literacy test could actually encourage the continued restriction of literacy education. This argument, used regularly by opponents of the literacy test before 1869, became a central theme in the congressional debates about the Fifteenth Amendment.

Likewise, Congressmen had articulated the arbitrary potential of the test's delivery and assessment before debates about the Fifteenth Amendment. Republican Representative John Farnsworth of Illinois, during the House debate about D.C. suffrage in January 1866, pointed out the inherent vagueness of education or intelligence as a qualification: "[W]here will you stop? One man will say that the voter should be able to read the Constitution and to write his name; another, that he should be acquainted with the history of the United States; another will demand a still higher degree of education and intelligence" (USHR, "39th Cong., 1st Sess." 205). Others extended the consequences of that vagueness by pointing out how it could be used to foster racial exclusion. Cowan's narrative, in which voters receive texts of widely varying difficulty, highlighted the way that race could define how literate capacity is assessed. Representative George Boutwell, Massachusetts Republican, noted in January 1866 that while the literacy test was given fairly in Massachusetts, "In South Carolina and Alabama it is a question of administration; and do you suppose the men who will preside and decide this question will come to the conclusion that a negro can read when the result is that he must also vote?" (310). These arguments opposed to a literacy test began to reveal the ways that the vagueness and arbitrary aspects of an educational qualification might serve the ends of racial disfranchisement and certainly shaped the perspective of the Radical Republicans who sought its ban in the text of the Fifteenth Amendment.

By 1869, that is, Congress had explored the potential abuses of the literacy test in some detail, enough so that a powerful bloc of Congressmen believed that such a qualification would almost certainly be used to effect African-American disfranchisement even when such disfranchisement was constitutionally banned. Now, rather than trying to keep a literacy test from being enacted in particular cases, certain congressmen wanted to include a permanent ban on the use of an educational or property qualification for suffrage. The issue split the Republican party and caused a rift between the House and the Senate that appeared for several days as though it would kill hopes for the Fifteenth Amendment.

The first voices supporting a ban of the literacy test appeared in the House. Samuel Shellabarger, Republican from Ohio, delivered a lengthy speech on January 29, identifying "intelligence or want of property" as two categories that Southern states would likely use if the Fifteenth Amendment banned only "race, color, or previous condition of slavery" as conditions of suffrage. "Sir, a mistake here is absolutely fatal," he told his House colleagues. "Let it remain possible, under our amendment, to still disfranchise the body of the colored people in the late rebel States and I tell you it will be done" (USHR, "Appendix" 97). In effect, Shellabarger argued, the amendment so worded would "legalize the disfranchisement of the vast body of the loyal race of the South" (97). Shellabarger's argument for a specific ban drew from previous arguments that referred to the historical ban on literacy education for slaves:

> This colored race cannot now read because we have for these centuries shut them from the light; they are poor because we have during these centuries stolen their property. And now we are about to make an amendment to our organic law . . . by which we say to the oppressing race, "You may forever in the future, as you have in the past, keep away from these people both knowledge and property, by keeping away from them the ballot." (98)

Here, Shellabarger predicted that a literacy test not only would offer a way to avoid the restrictions intended by the Fifteenth Amendment, but also would encourage further educational limitations for African Americans.

Boutwell attempted to assuage Shellabarger by adding to the end of the current amendment's language the clause "nor shall educational attainments or the possession of or ownership of property ever be made a test of the right of any citizen to vote" (USHR, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 726). He did so, however, not because he thought the language necessary, "but in order that the sense of the House may be tested upon the question" (726). When it was put to the vote, the House voted against the constitutional prohibition of literacy and property requirements and supported the original language Boutwell suggested, focused only on "race, color, and previous condition of slavery" (726). That language, with minor changes, would eventually become the text of the Fifteenth Amendment. Boutwell defended the language by arguing that expanding beyond those three conditions would endanger the ratification of the amendment in the states.

When the Senate took up the amendment, quickly turning to the House version as its starting point, the debate about potential loopholes in Boutwell's language became more charged. Alabama Republican Willard Warner noted that while the intent of the amendment was to enfranchise African Americans, "under it and without any violation of its letter or spirit, nine tenths of them

might be prevented from voting" with property or intelligence qualifications. In short, he argued, the amendment would fail to protect "the poor, unlearned man, who has nothing but the ballot, to whom it is a priceless heritage, a protection and a shield . . . it is the disfranchisement of the poor and the ignorant which it is our duty to guard against" (USS, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 862). Indiana Senator Morton noted that Southern states could create regulations "that will cut out forty-nine of every fifty colored men . . . from voting," by which "this amendment would be practically defeated in all those States where the great body of the colored people live" (863). Using "race, color, and previous condition of servitude" would allow Southern state governments to say that they do not disfranchise African Americans on those conditions, "but because they are naturally inferior in point of intellect, and unqualified to take part in the administration of Government" (863). Morton sought positive language stating who had the right to vote, not negative language that could be narrowly interpreted by future Southern state governments. Morton's argument—that racial exclusion would be enacted through using seemingly non-racial regulations—explicitly broke down a central rhetorical pillar of the literacy test. Florida Republican Adoniyah Welch spelled it out even more directly in his February 8 speech, responding to an objection to "negro suffrage" voiced regularly during the debate:

> This objection, stripped of its verbiage and stated syllogistically, reads as follows: intelligence and virtue are indispensable to the safe exercise of the right of suffrage; the African race in this country is inferior in respect to intelligence and virtue, and consequently it should be denied the right of suffrage. (982)

Though "the premise with which it starts nobody denies" (982), the second, Welch argued, was more in contention. He granted that "[the freedman] is inferior intellectually to the educated whites," but emphasized "it is the legitimate fruit of slavery and not a defect of race" (982). For Senator Jacob Howard, a Michigan Republican, the narrow attention to "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" made the amendment particularly vulnerable to abuses: "for any other cause, whether it be religious belief, or a want of moral training, or defect of education . . . the right to vote may be taken away from the citizen of the United States" (985).

To address such concerns, Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson proposed an amendment that would make it illegal to restrict suffrage "on account of race, color, nativity, property, education, or creed" (USS, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 1035), language which the Senate debated at great length into the following day. In Massachusetts, Wilson argued, the educational test "has become, through a sense of justice among the people, almost a dead letter" (USS, "Appendix" 154). "I was opposed to it when it was adopted, I did not believe in it, and I believe less in it now" (USS, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 1038). Though several Senators defended an educational qualification during the ensuing debate (New Hampshire Senator Patterson, for example, advancing the commonplace that the qualification "simply protects the purity and integrity of the Government" (1037)), Wilson's amendment passed the Senate with the necessary two thirds of the Senate, 39-16. When the House took up this amendment, however, on February 15, it was quickly defeated. Desperate to pass the amendment before the end of the session, House and Senate Republicans agreed on, and finally passed, a version focused only on "race, color, and previous condition of servitude" (USHR, "40th Cong., 3rd Sess." 1428).

Wyoming included a literacy requirement in its constitution in 1889, though I have been

unable to determine its exigence. For Mississippi in 1890, however, and for the several Southern states that followed over the next twenty years, the exigence was clear and overt, realizing the predictions put forth by congressmen decades earlier in their Reconstruction debates. The literacy tests, part of a full suite of disfranchising technologies, became one of the lasting legacies of the collapse of Reconstruction and helped prop up white supremacy in the Southern United States for decades to come. As predicted, it used an arbitrary measure to target a particular population, and it encouraged continued neglect of educational opportunities for African Americans in the American South. In addition, the American example begun by Mississippi served as an explicit model for similar literacy requirements targeting Indians in South Africa and Asians in Australia (see Lake).

CONCLUSION

I have explored here one episode in the history of the literacy test, but one that proved critical to the test's future as an instrument of racist disfranchisement. The congressional debates about the test during Reconstruction are important, however, not only because they nearly banned the test as a suffrage requirement, or because congressmen correctly and repeatedly predicted that the test would be useful for denying the vote to African Americans. The debates also demonstrate a savviness about the rhetorical value of literacy, about the ways that the idea of literacy could, and would, be used in service of ends that have nothing to do with reading and writing. Discourses surrounding literacy in the United States and elsewhere have long relied on the salutary associations of literacy to support measures promoting a variety of unrelated or partially related ends. Indeed, the history of educational reform, and in particular the reform movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, largely bear out the value of leaning on the inarguable benefit of literacy to promote agendas that stretch well beyond literacy. And throughout American history, discussions of literacy and illiteracy almost always have a racial component, a racial identification. The literacy test, in conjunction with the antebellum proscription of literacy education for slaves, should be seen as a crucial creator and lasting affirmer of those identifications, a critical legal prop for the idea of literacy as a property of whiteness. Indeed, for three-quarters of a century, the idea of literacy was central the massive disfranchisement of millions of citizens, the greatest political swindle in American history.[6]

"The debates also demonstrate a savviness about the rhetorical value of literacy, about the ways that the idea of literacy could, and would, be used in service of ends that have nothing to do with reading and writing."

NOTES

[1] Details regarding Blackwell's testing appear in the United States Commission on Civil Rights transcript of hearings in Jackson, Mississippi. See especially pages 28-32 and 47-52.

[2] Actually, the courts never struck down the literacy test, though they did rule occasionally against particular structural aspects. It was the United States Congress, under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that ended such testing. I repeated this mistake (2007), though independently of Heath.

[3] In the southern literacy tests, local assessors—typically registrars at county courthouses—were the primary agents in the tests' goal of racial exclusion, enforcing rather than resisting state directives.

[4] My primary sources for this historical overview are Gillette, Foner, and Keyssar. Keyssar and Gillette detail the extended debate about the Fifteenth Amendment and proposed bans on an educational requirement in sharp detail.

[5] The complete text of the relevant part of Section 1, Senate Bill No. 114, reads:

> *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,* That every male citizen of the United States who shall have attained the age of twenty-one years, and shall have resided in the city of Washington one year immediately preceding the day of election, and shall be resident of the ward in which he shall offer to vote, (except persons non compos mentis, vagrants, paupers or persons who shall have been convicted of any infamous crime,) and shall have paid all school taxes properly assessed against him, shall be entitled to vote for mayor, collector, register, members of the board of aldermen, and board of common council, and assessor, and for every officer authorized to be elected at any election, under any act or acts to which this is amendatory or supplementary. (USS, "38th Cong., 1st sess." 1-2)

The language hailed from 1848, when the Act originally appeared.

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Ante Up: Econocide and the Literacy Game in U.S. Prisons

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> "There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about."
>
> —Jean Rhys

> "The point of collaborative learning is not simply to demystify the authority of knowledge by revealing its social character but to transform the productive apparatus, to change the social character of production. In this regard, it will help to cast consensus not as a "real world" practice but as a utopian one."
>
> —John Trimbur

I.

In "(Un)rigging the Literacy Game: Political Literacies that Challenge Econocide," Daniel Cleary and Christopher Wilkey describe writing projects they have implemented in prison and university classrooms, respectively, that serve as sites of resistance to the disempowerment of marginalized voices. Cleary, who teaches writing in a prison, encouraged his inmate students to "mushfake"—which loosely means to fake it until they make it—in dominant modes of literacy and to reflect on this mushfaking through creative writing. Wilkey, who teaches writing at a university in Cincinnati, had his students interview community members of Cincinnati regarding a giant mural of a white politician in a top hat that was placed in their neighborhood without their input. Wilkey's students help vocalize the feelings of the poor and marginalized, who overwhelmingly expressed a sense of displacement from the mural. Cleary and Wilkey frame these acts of resistance as responses to econocide, which affects both those behind walls and those being pushed to the outskirts of their communities through gentrification. Cleary and Wilkey cite Arjun Appadurai, who defines econocide as "new modes of violence playing out across the world in the wake of massive inequalities and the rapidity of change produced by world capitalism" (Appadurai, qtd. in Cleary and Wilkey 45). By situating prison literacy alongside the silencing of those affected by gentrification, Cleary and Wilkey draw attention to the continuum upon which econocide exists.

Cleary and Wilkey's projects do not share much in common, beyond their fundamental resistance to econocide. The collaborative and community based project Wilkey is able to facilitate in the university classroom seems beyond the grasp of the limited means of the prison writing classroom. The positioning of these projects side-by-side opens up the space for much dialogue. As Cleary and Wilkey note,

> The driving force behind such calls as the fight against gentrification and the support of

> prison education is the very valid fear that the most vulnerable among us are at risk of not experiencing the benefits that come with economic development and access to formal education. An even starker threat is the very real possibility that people could be altogether removed from the community to make room for financial investment and educational opportunities for only those deemed worthy enough. (45)

Cleary and Wilkey draw attention to the fact that the people who are pushed out by gentrification are one step closer to being removed from their communities altogether and put behind bars. Though such acts of violence seem to exist on a spectrum, the etymology of the word *econocide,* with the suffix "cide," suggests not only the violence mentioned in Appadurai's definition, but death. Whether literal or figurative, econocide entails exclusion akin to death. Another definition of econocide, in fact, specifically refers to "the wave of suicides…linked to the [recent] global economic crisis" (Schott). The state of imprisonment is sometimes referred to as "civil death," (Dayan 25) a legal fiction contrived in order to "extinguish" (25) people from civilization. Non-incarcerated individuals who are pushed to the outskirts of society or otherwise denied access to or participation in dominant Discourse experience a form of social death or negative personhood (25).

In order to combat econocide, Cleary and Wilkey illustrate, we need to make the most of classrooms and the resources available to us to formulate sites of resistance. "At the end of the day," they conclude, "it is developing political literacies that un-strip the authority of oppressive Discourses while assisting economic others in reclaiming their rightful position within the body politic that holds out the best hope for delegitimizing econocide in the public consciousness" (56). Yet how do we go about delegitimizing ideologies ingrained in our consciousness? Toni Morrison notes that our very concept of freedom is predicated upon our history of oppression (38). Centuries of econocide have enabled the rhetoric of freedom to sound louder in contrast. Overcoming econocide will take more than delegitimizing a concept in our public consciousness; it will require changing the structure of that collective altogether. In a sense, we as academics must mushfake our way in the world of politics until we see real change brought about. And even if the situation seems as bleak and unalterable as the walls of a prison itself, we must not stop trying.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in resisting econocide in the classroom, however, is discrepancy in resources. This particularly pertains to prison writing classrooms, where technology and even basic resources are often lacking. In a 2014 letter, an inmate in a U.S. state prison reports, "You have no idea how hard it is to find a dictionary around here" (Anonymous). Though this predicament might sound shocking to those who have not been inside prison walls, his problem is not uncommon. In a prison writing class in which I serve as research assistant (primarily an intermediary between the prisoners and digital world), students can often only find textbooks that are several decades old and bring them to class to aid with their research. Telling students the few resources they have worked so hard to obtain no longer hold much currency in the dominant Discourses in which they are trying to establish their competency is difficult. Though many of these students are no strangers to insurmountable obstacles, the last thing we want to do is add to this list. Striking the right balance between remedying lack of relevant resources and encouraging mushfaking as a means to success is key.

In many ways, Cleary's project offers an important intervention in critical discourse on American prison literacy, which does not commonly address the need for mastery of dominant Discourses. Mushfaking is premised upon not letting insufficient resources be a deterrent. Cleary and Wilkey cite Nancy Mack:"'Mushfake' means to make do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake" (55). However, though paucity of resources is widely regarded as problematic amongst prison educators, on the flip side it fosters the teaching of non-dominant Discourses that might seem more exciting in their deviation from the norm. Indeed, subjugated Discourse can also be an important form of resistance. "Looking beyond the normative discourse to develop a fuller definition of literacy," states Anne Gere, "entails rehabilitating subjugated discourses and considering how these discourses of difference alter the normative version" (250). Subjugated and non-dominant Discourses are championed by many writing teachers in prisons, who adhere to a therapeutic model of literacy instruction (Sweeney). Gregory Shafer notes of his students who are inmates, "While most high school and college students approach writing as a way to acquire the academic skills needed to survive in the society in which they hope to flourish, these unique pupils approach it as a precious gift that can help give voice to their feelings of consternation, alienation, and pain-feelings that erupt in fonts of warm emotion" (75). Though such representative perspectives can indeed be beneficial for both students and instructors, they also perpetuate the divide between the under-resourced prison writing classroom and the well-equipped university writing classroom. Ironically, for many teachers, the prison writing classroom becomes an escape from the confining parameters of the university classroom. In "Teaching Literature in Prison," Raymond Hedin claims that for both teacher and inmate student, the prison classroom is an escape from the normal routine. Writes Hedin, "[The inmate] escapes to the classroom rather than from it," and for the teacher, "the prison course is inevitably outside the daily routine, the ordinary 'business' of the profession" (282). Consequently, reports Hedin, there is more freedom and opportunity to escape dominant Discourse.

Hedin and Shafer were writing during and after the era of Pell Grant funding, respectively, thus showing the continuity of escapist ideologies amongst prison educators. The end of Pell Grants caused the 350 existing prison college programs to dwindle to only a handful and for resources to be cut (Tregea and Larmour 195). This reinforced the shift from rehabilitative to draconian policies that occurred in American prison reform starting around the 1970s (Davis 51). Subtle differences in the tone during the Pell Grant era are apparent—Hedin does clarify, for instance, that his goal is not to "other" the prison classroom, whereas Shafer seems to revel in the contrast the prison classroom offers. This suggests that resources and infrastructure have some bearing on our expectations and goals, and it further illustrates how the draconian disciplinary policies in place today can potentially cause educators to use therapeutic pedagogies to compensate for this fact.

Cleary focuses on the need for competency in dominant Discourse among inmates and goes a step beyond what much current critical work on prison literacy in America does. Cleary and Wilkey recognize a need to create dialogue about the different ways in which econocide impacts literacy practices. They point out that "fluency in, or even apprenticeship into, prison Discourses can inhibit prisoners' abilities to master dominant secondary Discourses," and thus can prove counterproductive

for inmates when re-entering society and trying to escape the cycle of recidivism which affects 75% of American prisoners (Cooper et. al). Prisoners have typically failed to demonstrate fluency in a dominant secondary Discourse, and even though lack of resources can make this feat difficult, developing "metaknowledge regarding their primary Discourses and their non-dominant secondary Discourses" is a step in the right direction (Cleary and Wilkey 54-55).

The ways in which the academic discourse is affected by the surrounding political discourses becomes increasingly apparent when examining European scholarship on prison writing. In Europe, where in legal terms postsecondary education is viewed as a human right rather than a privilege, prison writings classrooms in Europe are much more developed than the majority of their US counterparts (Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 24). In composition and in other subjects in European prisons, resources are much more widely available. At the flexible school in Danish prisons, students have access to the databases such as *Britannica Online,* online dictionaries, library facts base, nine million newspaper articles from the most important Danish news papers, the largest Danish database with press photos, and all data from the Danish Meteorological Institute ("Prison Education").

In Europe, high quality prison education is viewed as a moral obligation rather than an issue of debate. In "E-Learning in Prison Education in Europe: Recommendations for European Policymakers," for example, Friedrich states:

> Education and training in prisons have to aim at levels of competence which are comparable to those outside the prison…. In today's society, where digital competence is becoming necessary at the workplace as well as in daily life, the chance for ex-offenders to be reintegrated can be greatly improved by offering qualifications in the field of new media and computer use. People lacking digital competence are at risk of exclusion. (5-6)

The statement is representative of the norm; the majority of recent European publications on this issue share the same priorities and concerns.

The lack of resources in prison writing classrooms in America remains an undeniable setback. Attempts to re-integrate international human rights law and incorporate the internet often prove futile; for instance, a recent request to incorporate the internet for educational purposes in New Mexico was denied on the grounds of its being deemed unconstitutional (Lockard). Even when technology is incorporated into prison education, it is rarely cutting edge or has the goal of promoting equal opportunity. Texas policymakers, for example, are boasting their innovativeness in being among the first to grant computer access to prisoners for educational purposes. In reality, however, they have cut millions of dollars of funding and fired teachers who were providing face-to-face instruction in the Windham School District. They now plan to replace this with old software with curriculums that may or may not be up-to-date and satisfactory. Mere implementation of technology is not enough to rectify inequalities; if technology is used as a means of cutting back resources rather than creating additional resources then, as Lockard notes, technology could become a way of perpetuating hierarchies rather than undoing them (Lockard).

II.

Any attempt to create continuity between literacy instruction at prisons and at universities is beneficial, and the pairing of Wilkey and Cleary's projects does just that. However, this pairing also makes apparent the deep-rooted and oftentimes unnoticed differences in how we approach literacy in these settings. Beyond the shared goal of resisting econocide, Wilkey's and Cleary's projects don't have much in common. These divergences all stem from material disparities in one form or another. Wilkey's project is in a university class taken for credit; Cleary conducts his work in a creative writing workshop. Wilkey's class is centered upon community literacy, and Cleary's class is isolated from the community. Wilkey takes advantage of mobility and various resources, whereas Cleary's classrooms must manage with the few resources available to students. Perhaps most importantly, in Wilkey's class, students became active agents collaboratively participating in a dominant Discourse. While Cleary's project encourages students to think about what such participation means, they have little opportunity to actually do so. The inmates remain the objects of their own inquiries, whereas the students in Wilkey's class collaborate with others and take on the role of objective reporters. The introspective reflection practiced in Cleary's workshop is certainly beneficial and something all students—whether in prisons or universities—should have the opportunity to do.

With the ultimate goal of bridging the gap between the literacy practices of the privileged and unprivileged, we must also keep in mind the importance of fostering collaboration in prison writing classrooms, of encouraging the inmates to step outside the role of self-examining subjects in need of rehabilitation. This is not to undermine the importance of this meta-cognitive work, but rather to draw attention to how collaboration is an integral part of literacy development and a key pedagogical cornerstone. In *NCTE Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment*, collaboration is emphasized as much as technology. The second criteria listed, after developing "fluency and proficiency with the tools of technology," is "to build intentional cross cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought" (NCTE Executive Committee). This sentiment is echoed by the majority of rhetoricians and writing teachers, yet it often gets cast aside in the prison writing classroom. Motivational factors for collaboration include increased audience awareness, crossing socio-economic and cultural boundaries, and working through difference (see John Trimbur, Linda Flower, and Ken Bruffee for more on collaborative pedagogy).

Indeed, Cleary and Wilkey point out the problematic nature of the hyper-individualization that often occurs in prison settings. The remedial approach to literacy instruction in American prisons, which emphasizes assessment and literacy rates, can create "a rhetoric of personal responsibility" that makes the individuals accountable rather than the system (46). Cleary and Wilkey state, "This purportedly apolitical treatment of literacy actually does a great deal of political work, shifting the blame for incarceration completely onto the prisoners themselves. It assumes that the incarcerated either lack the literacy skills valued by the institution and society, or that they possess these skills and have purposely chosen not to use them" (54). Reflective writing allows multiple literacies and subsequent complexities to emerge, but, on its own, it also perpetuates, albeit to a lesser degree than assessment, isolated modalities of literacy development.

If hyper-individualization is part of the problem underlying the lack of educational resources in prisons, then moving away from this focus seems as though it would be a useful means of un-stripping political discourses. Thankfully we are no longer in a culture where prisoner communication is prohibited, for the most part, but *how* to best facilitate communication in a truly collaborative way proves challenging. Cleary mentions facilitating class discussions, which is perhaps the most foundational form of collaboration. Interviewing and peer review are also both useful collaborative strategies; even if an interview can't go beyond the bounds of the classroom, having students interview one another and write about each other's experiences can be an effective shift from the primarily introspective focus of prison writing. Considering these collaborative possibilities would create more dialogue between Wilkey's work and Cleary's work. Though of course resisting econocide entails the un-silencing of disempowered voices, we must also view the possibility of moving beyond one's own narrative as a means of empowerment.

Collaboration, whether it is in an isolated classroom or whether it is able to push past those boundaries, enables students to conceive of themselves as active agents and to become part of something larger than themselves. Reflective writing also serves a hugely important role, and students both in the prison and university classrooms can benefit from having that balanced with collaborative learning. By striving for congruity between prison and university writing classrooms in whatever way we can, we take a step in fostering transparency and change. And as we try to carry on this important work of helping the marginalized "reclaim . . . their rightful position within the body politic," we need to foster all the dialogue that we can (Wilkey and Cleary 56).

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Book Review *Reimagining Process: Online Writing Archives and the Future of Writing Studies*, by Kyle Jensen

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In *Reimagining Process: Online Writing Archives and the Future of Writing Studies*, Kyle Jensen seeks to complicate key disciplinary attachments in Composition and Rhetoric by rethinking pedagogical strategies for process-oriented research, theory, and practice. Jensen offers an important alternative to teaching and studying writing through two main arguments: First, Jensen identifies how-centered approaches to process currently dominating composition pedagogy, which he claims ineffectively rely on student empowerment. Second, after underscoring the danger of maintaining such a how-centered approach, he outlines how moving to what-centered approaches by way of online writing archives can expose what writing is and what its processes actually look like across disciplinary contexts. The pivotal distinction between the two approaches rests in the goals and objectives for instructing process. How-centered approaches to process, he argues, teach students to "gain control over their literate development," which hones in on the process of producing, drafting, revising, and reflecting on student compositional practices (2). Because "writing unfolds as a process whether or not instructors teach writing as a process," what-centered approaches turn away from a focus on processing our compositional habits and towards processing writing as a cultural, social, material, and historical movement (7). Thus, Jensen avers that what-centered approaches ask what writing in its object form *is* by studying "writing as a historical, theoretical, and material phenomenon" (6). Jensen compellingly argues that the field has come to a stalemate with how we understand process, and recasting process within this materialist perspective offers a key contribution to how we teach and study writing.

Although Jensen's work sits squarely in the sub-fields of composition theory and pedagogy, his work also provides important implications for digital and literacy studies—specifically those interested in how agency, posthumanism, materiality, and archives can be used to expand conceptions of how we study writing. What-centered approaches, Jensen submits, help examine what the principle characteristics of a writing process actually are, how these processes unfold, and how we as scholars and teachers might help students engage with the materiality of writing. John Trimbur called upon scholars to treat writing in its noun form—something that moves throughout society and even acts upon us—and scholars more recently have answered that call by providing ways to help students grapple with mediated approaches to writing (e.g. Shipka; Sirc; DeJoy; Prior; and Foster). Jensen falls in line with such scholars; however, Jensen's use of online writing archives pushes back against the goal of empowering students to assume control over their own literate development, which he proposes is an impractical task.

The first two chapters outline Jensen's theoretical intervention by addressing the normative hierarchical structures supported by how-centered approaches. While interrogating the field's

penchant for empowerment, Jensen suggests that such a notion fails to speak to writing's reality and rests on a rhetorical (and futile) project dedicated to pedagogical care. Through an analysis of Žižek's concept of interpassivity, Jensen underscores how teachers are made responsible for the student's beliefs about writing, where students are unable to get at the political goal of challenging hierarchical structures. He contends this how-centered approach that appeals to empowerment enacts a feminine positionality. Jensen sharply addresses how such an "arrangement repeatedly enacts violence against women and other feminized subjects, not only because it positions them as symbolically inferior to masculine subjects but also because it creates opportunities for physical and emotional violence" (35). Thus, the valorized feminine teacher subversively recasts the male dominated structure. After underscoring the gendered appeals to empowerment and pedagogical care, Jensen presents his strongest analysis by moving to consider how the portfolio structure serves to fulfill Foucault's notions of power. By outlining how process is often predicated on reflection, Jensen delicately unveils how students are caught up with mirroring the goals and objectives laid out in the syllabus. In other words, the portfolio serves the purpose of the panopticon, which enacts "surveillance that improves rather than subverts the operations of higher education" (49). Jensen carefully and impressively argues that within portfolio reflection, students often fulfill the desires of their instructor, where the traditional portfolio structure converts students into disciplined writing bodies. Drawing from Foucault's terms, Jensen analyzes how space, time, normalization and hierarchy, and surveillance all operate under the terms of how-centered approaches. To escape portfolio surveillance, Jensen suggests that instead we treat portfolios as archives that may better theorize the irruptive movements that occur in our actualized writing process.

After walking through his theoretical intervention, Jensen then turns to the online writing archives themselves to explore how what-centered approaches might provide students a better way to grapple with the material, historical, and theoretical dimensions of writing. By treating the notion of writing as a "ghostly possession" (84) that we never fully control, Jensen cleverly underscores the "uncanny space where writing unfolds in surprising ways" (83) by displaying two case studies—his own writing process alongside a student's—that unveil the complexity behind processing writing. In this latter half of the book, Jensen productively moves away from teaching writing process as empowerment and towards treating writing (and the writer) as a direct object of study. At this point, "careful curiosity" becomes Jensen's pivoting point away from "pedagogical care," which he argues "expose[s] one's limits as a knowing subject" (115). Jensen notably expands the angles through which we see writing, and by foregrounding a pedagogical approach that assumes the messiness of writing, his what-centered approach helps build "literate dexterity" that arguably can transfer outside of the composition classroom to a number of different sites (131).

Jensen's argument unfolds first through a conceptual articulation of how the terms process, power, care, portfolios, and reflection have been taken up in writing studies. The latter half of the book then turns to two case studies—Jensen's own online writing archive alongside a student example—to demonstrate how a what-centered approach invites reinvigorated understandings of these concepts. By suggesting a turn to what-centered approaches to process, Jensen does not advocate that we move away from the use of process in the writing classroom; however, he calls for an approach that is not

married to reflection and empowerment. The way process is currently understood, Jensen suggests, leaves teachers to the "maternal management of student emotion" (4). Jensen boldly claims that this how-centered approach does "pedagogical violence" by relying and reaffirming the heteronormative structures that this field desires to break down (5). Online writing archives, on the other hand, move the teaching of writing into a territory that treats writing in its object form by acknowledging its disembodied, abstracted, and material capabilities. Turning away from pedagogical care and towards an ethos of careful curiosity, this book strives to acknowledge writing's ghostly capacities that will serve a student's ability to transfer skills beyond the writing classroom into different disciplinary contexts.

Jensen's work speaks directly to teachers and researchers of writing, whether in first year writing classrooms or graduate seminars. This work provides an important commentary on how the field risks resting in a stale stasis of empowerment where the limits of a writing subject are left unquestioned. The book offers convincing value in looking at writing as an object, and Jensen's move to suggest online writing archives expands how we understand writing as a dynamic impacted by our material, theoretical, and historical surroundings. While this materialist perspective provides an important contribution, I'm weary of the gendered implications that may arise by attacking pedagogical care through the lens of mothering and a feminine subjectivity. Additionally, I would have liked to hear more about the student's experience negotiating the methodological messiness encouraged by the online writing archive when Jensen turned to the archives themselves. Overall, this book helps bridge the audience of composition to that of literacy studies by treating writing and writers in their object form. By reclaiming how the field understands process, Jensen opens up the field's understanding of how materiality must be made visible for what writing is and does.

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