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Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy

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Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy

Eric Darnell Pritchard

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Reviewed by Casely E. Coan

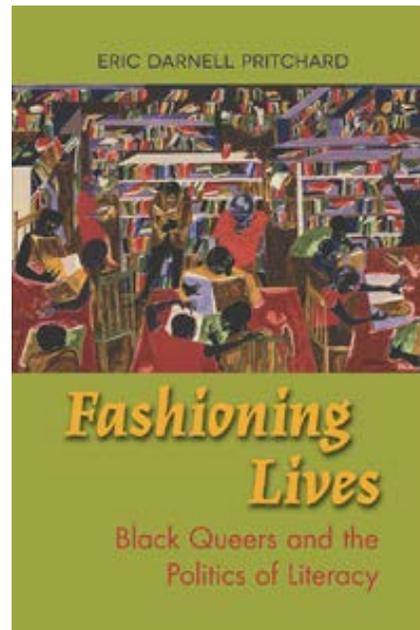
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Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy by Eric Darnell Pritchard inhabits the intersection between African American, feminist, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) literacy, composition, and rhetoric research where Pritchard hopes to call forth a field of study called Black Queer Literacies. “Literacy” takes on a capacious and shifting definition in this text, reaching far beyond simple reading and writing. Pritchard’s definition of literacy is rooted in the work of Sojourner Truth and Paulo Freire:

literacy is understood as the myriad ways of meaning-making that are contextualized by sociocultural conditions. Among the literacy activities employed toward that meaning-making are more traditionally regarded ones such as a reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as other literacy performances that occur alongside or external to those traditional literacy activities. These ‘other literacy performances’ refer to literacies that emerge off the page as well, such as sense-making, discernment, and methods of encoding and decoding various signs and symbols we encounter in our everyday lives. (19)

The expansiveness of this approach is apparent from the prologue wherein Pritchard offers five vignettes which narrativize his own life experience as a Black, queer, feminist, cisgender man who makes meaning as “a learner, teacher, scholar, artist, activist, and advocate” (1). These vignettes signal the importance of life stories in this text’s exploration of literacy and the ways in which literacy and meaning-making emerge off the page.

As Pritchard turns to the life stories of his Black LGBTQ research participants, he specifically examines literacy through the twin poles of literacy normativity and restorative literacies. Literacy normativity is used here to describe those uses of literacy that “create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are



labeled alien or other through textscapes” (28). Through these standards and beliefs, literacy normativity inflicts harm, “steals emotional resources from people, wounding them through texts” (24). We see literacy normativity in the ostracization of young Black queers whose reading habits render them simultaneously queer and ‘not black enough;’ within rigid interpretations of the Bible which condemn LGBTQ identities; and in the estrangement of Black LGBTQ people from texts and resources that would educate them about their histories and communities. The damage and violence done by literacy normativity highlight the danger of “treat[ing] African American, LGBTQ literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies as mutually exclusive” (33). Indeed, one of Pritchard’s most meaningful interventions into the field of literacy, composition, and rhetoric here is his critical attention to the intersectional nature of literacy, its acquisition, its utility, and its role in identity formation, affirmation, and expression. By channeling discussions of raced, sexualized, or gendered experiences with literacy as separate and distinct issues, much scholarship in literacy, composition, and rhetoric neglects the compounded experiences of Black LGBTQ people whose lives are impacted by the racialized nature of their gender and sexual identities.

This separation of race, sex, and gender from literacy is challenged here by Pritchard’s attention to the creation of restorative literacies in the face of the damage caused by literacy normativity. Restorative literacies are those practices that Black queers employ “as a means of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination” (24). These practices foster self- and communal love within and among the Black LGBTQ people who utilize them to counter messaging that might otherwise make such love feel undeserved or out of reach:

Restorative literacies are the way in which one creates a space outside of oppressive institutional structures and individual acts of violence. . . . Restorative literacies do not seek to reconsolidate power; rather, restorative literacies occur when one displays or asserts control over one’s life and voice through various literacy acts. Restorative literacies are very much dependent on one’s self-identification and positionality, which means that individual and communal acts of restorative literacies are situated differently and evolve across time and place. (33–34)

This negotiation of power, like the participants’ subjectivities, shifts in response to changes of subjectivity, situation, and social dynamics. As such, literacy moves between, among, and across literacy as individual experience/s and literacy as communal experience/s relative to each individual’s literacy needs at a given time; while a desire to see one’s queer self in the church might lead a Black gay man into solitary Bible study, his desire for a community of fellow Black queers might send him to his local LGBTQ bookstore in search of kin. In *Fashioning Lives*, Pritchard acquaints us with the inner lives of his participants in order to demonstrate the power of restorative literacies to combat literacy normativity’s impact on Black queer literacies.

Chapter one initiates us into the world of literacy normativity and the restorative literacies which seek to counter them by sharing research participants’ complex experiences with those literacy practices many of us remember fondly from our child-

hoods: curling up with a good book or writing in a journal. Pritchard explains to us how literacy normativity both “emerges as uses of literacy that categorize individuals as nonnormative” even as it “code[s these same] people and their literacy practices as nonnormative” (58). Literacy normativity becomes apparent in four distinct ways in the participants’ life stories: access to literacy is unequal due to the sexualized, racialized, gendered, and classed structures of literacy; normative literacy practices are simultaneously protective and destructive for Black LGBTQ people; negotiating this protective-destructive nature requires sometimes unusual strategies to successfully navigate; and participants consider reading and writing a critical part of forming and affirming Black LGBTQ subjectivities. Coining the term “literacy concealment” to describe the ways in which participants repurpose literacy practices in order to “create relationships to reading and writing, develop an affirming sense of self, subvert hostile literacy environments, and engage in a host of other activities that normalizing systems of racialized sexuality and literacy normativity would discourage,” Pritchard shows us both the freedoms and violences which literacy affords for Black queer people who are seeking to know and affirm their identity/ies through practices of reading and writing (60). Examples of this complex relationship to literacy include Kendall Ivins’s hidden collection of *Advocate* magazines, Keesha Simpson’s relationship with the fellow Black lesbian working at her childhood library, and Steven Morgan’s personal library of stolen books.

Chapter two shifts from those literacy practices which help Black LGBTQ people to identify and affirm their subjectivities to those practices which foster (or thwart) their relationships with Black queer historical legacies, family, and other kin. In the tradition of many other studies in literacy, composition, and rhetoric by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Malea Powell, among others, Pritchard highlights the pivotal role literacy normativity plays in the historical erasure of Black queer community/ies and the subsequent impact this erasure has on contemporary Black LGBTQ people: “A primary effect of historical erasure—one that further demonstrates the intersections of this form of literacy normativity with nonnormative racialized genders and sexualities—is the impact it has on one’s personal and communal identity formation and affirmation” (104). In search of and in an effort to construct a sense of historical rootedness, the research participants deploy “tenacious reading” in order to “read a text against the popular interpretation or normative views” (107; 113). Subsequently, participants are connected to ancestors, fictive kin, and elders: fellow Black LGBTQ people, real and fictional, alive and deceased, whom participants identify as helpful guides, influential (non-biological) family, or older models for ways of being in the world. Black LGBTQ people read more than texts, they read lives, in order to establish loving connections to their community—past and present.

Restorative literacies in chapter three help Pritchard’s research participants “enact self- and communal love by creating one’s self and community as divine” despite uses of literacy which debase Black LGBTQ people and deny them access to religious or spiritual spaces or communities (155). We see how literacy normativity takes the form of spiritual violence “including hostile interpretations of religious . . . texts; physical and emotional abuse justified through the use of . . . spiritual beliefs; [and/

or] demanding silence about identities through threats of dismissal or banishment . . . based on religious-based disavowals of one's gender or sexual identities" (154). Forging connections between queer sexuality/gender and faith/religion in literacy studies through womanist and queer theology, Pritchard shows how Black LGBTQ people fashion their religious/spiritual identities and build accepting communities of Black queers of faith. Participants alternatively do this by queering Christian identity, finding different faith identities in new communities/religions, or creating entirely new spiritualities for themselves. Examples include the Unity Fellowship Church Movement's support services for those living with HIV/AIDS, Stephanie Flowers's path to Buddhism through a practice of questioning religious text, and another participant's ritual of reading Audre Lorde and Alice Walker poetry three times daily before starting her day.

In his final site of analysis, Pritchard takes us from the church pew to the chatroom to examine how Black queers do restorative literacies by forging a relationship between literacy and the erotic to "confront regimes of normativity within Black queer digital realms" (193). Within Black LGBTQ blogs, vlogs, and other websites, participants deploy written, audiovisual, and other texts in an effort to counter literacy normativity which devalues individuals based on race, age, size, facial characteristics, gender, ability, and other factors. These interventions are framed as erotic by Pritchard, who draws upon Lorde's definition of the erotic as a "power source" (Pritchard 202) which fosters "self-connection" (Lorde 57), self-care, self- and communal love. Where language and literacy have been shown to shape Black LGBTQ people's sense of self, sense of historical rootedness, and sense of faith in the previous chapters, chapter four reveals the role literacy normativity plays in the participants' sense of themselves as worthy of love and desire. For example, participant Allen Baxter counters normative economies of desire by naming and disavowing the fat- and femmophobic culture present on the meet-up sites he frequents with his friends. Similarly, Ella Mosley uses her keyboard to not only combat transphobia but to create a safe digital space for fellow transgender women out of which a national organization focused on transgender activism was founded. On a whole, this chapter shows us "how these uses of literacy, while being activist in effect, also frame being fat, femme, transgender, and gender nonconforming as remaking desire and embracing undesirability as a liberatory position in the digital and physical worlds" (240). It is in this chapter that the capaciousness of Pritchard's definition of literacy becomes challenging. While readers coming to *Fashioning Lives* through queer studies or Black studies will find this discussion's foundation in Audre Lorde familiar, this chapter moves farther from literatures familiar to literacy, composition, and rhetoric scholars. In so doing, Pritchard is making good on his aim to start new conversations at the intersection of Black studies, feminist, and LGBTQ studies but the resulting discussion in chapter four feels, at times, incongruent with the other chapters' discussion of literacy.

While much research in literacy studies endeavors to examine how various communities create meaning through literacy, *Fashioning Lives* successfully examines "the meaning [Black LGBTQ people] give to literacy" (244):

restorative literacies . . . codify the diversity of methods Black LGBTQ people use to create and sustain their identities and environments in ways that demonstrate and engender self- and communal love. This self- and communal love takes various shapes, such as writing for empowerment, justice, self-care, healing, truth-telling, and community formation. Restorative literacies is not a means to argue for Black LGBTQ literacies as a practice in desire of recognition, acceptance, or normality; rather, it describes how research participants create an environment to truly have and live a life in the fullest sense of the word on their own terms. (246)

In Pritchard's hands, this book itself reads like an act of communal love for Black LGBTQ people. *Fashioning Lives* seeks to draw whole lives together—how Black LGBTQ people read, how they write, how they pray, who they love—and highlights how ways of knowing and crafting self are deeply woven throughout any one person's relationship with literacy. The concluding chapter's closing calls Black Queer Literacies a revolution. This book itself serves as its own small revolution at the intersection of African American, LGBTQ, and literacy studies, inviting more research which honestly grapples with intersectional literacy experiences. This honesty provides community literacy scholars, activists, and educators a helpful model for how to approach community members as whole beings, humans whose racial, sexual, and gendered identities intersect in ways that impact their access to and relationship with literacy. This book paints an intricate portrait of the relationship between the self and the community, sometimes warmly intimate, other times achingly estranged, which offers important insight into the dual role community can play in literacy: while community can shape experiences of and attitudes toward literacy, literacy can also *form* communities where there once were only individuals.

Works Cited

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 53–59.