Reading, Writing, and Queer Survival: Affects, Matterings, and Literacies Across Appalachia

Caleb Pendygraft
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Caleb Pendygraft opens his prologue to *Reading, Writing, and Queer Survival* with a vignette that features a mountain, a Bible verse, and his grandparents—his grandfather sitting on a worn recliner and his grandmother cooking eggs and bacon on a well-seasoned skillet. His grandfather asks him, "Do you really believe if you prayed hard enough and had faith the grain of a mustard seed, you could move that mountain out there?" The mountain was a hill that his grandfather and father created by carving out Appalachian soil, and the Bible verse was Matthew 17:20. When Pendygraft returned to his grandparents' house in Appalachia years later, after coming out, his grandfather was dead, and the mountain had been excavated.

What is noticeable in this vignette is the limited role literacy as text or writing plays. Pendygraft says that his grandparents could be analyzed in this scene as his "literacy sponsors." Drawing on this established literacy theory, Pendygraft notes that other scholars might look at this scene of literacy and see that his grandparents enabled his religious literacies from a young age. But he argues that relying on this analysis alone would be missing the point: "I find that conventional notions of literacy sponsorship fail to account for all the complexities of meaning-making and power relations in queer lives" (xi). As such, Pendygraft depicts a Biblical literacy that is not as alive in the scene as his grandfather's recliner and dose of insulin medication, or his granny's eggs and bacon sizzling on the cast-iron skillet, or for that matter, the mountain that appeared to have up and left when he returned eight years later.

To understand this scene, and the potential of literacy in this scene, Pendygraft argues for a theory of "animate literacies," drawing on Mel Chen's theory of animacy and biopolitics, where animacy can be described as a "quality of agency, awareness, mobility and liveliness" (Chen 2, qtd. in Pendygraft xi). This includes the material world or nonhuman actors. He writes, "literacy involves an amalgam of the human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, stretching across a spectrum of concrete materiality to the abstraction of belief" (xi). In other words, making the case for a less human-centric notion of literacy, one that focuses less on human-to-human interactions and more on the underexplored elements that animate us, he writes: "Words typed on a screen, read aloud or written down are not the only markers of literacy" (xi). Ultimately, Pendygraft aims to theorize the nonhuman in literacy through his own qualitative research in the form of ethnographic and autoethnographic storytelling. He does this to understand how queerness, literacy, and Appalachia shape and

are shaped by one another, and in doing so, offers an expansion of posthumanist literacy as a theoretical framework.

In doing this work, Pendygraft's book can be connected to scholars of literacy who have questioned the centrality of the human, and even the centrality of "writing" in our research on literacy. This includes posthumanist and new materialist approaches by rhetoricians, compositionists, and educational literacy scholars, many of whom are cited in Pendygraft's book. One might also connect Pendygraft's aim to Catherine Prendergast's notion, after researching literacy in an undergraduate research lab, that Writing to Learn approaches may overemphasize the role of writing in science research, and that literacy scholars might instead think of writing as one voice in a larger chorus of embodied and sensate learning. Similarly, in Evan Watkin's critique of literacy studies, he argues that literacy scholars should be less concerned with documenting new and more literacies and more on the affective and economic conditions in which literacy subjects are constituted.

Finally, we might draw upon Kevin M. Leander and Christian Ehret's question from *Affect in Literacy Learning and Teaching* as one way to frame Pendygraft's work. In their introduction on the role affect might play in our understanding of literacy learning, they ask: "Where did life go?" (7). In posing this question, they hope to "recover, in literacy studies, a sense of the energy, possibility, and feeling of life within the everyday ways that people engage with literacy" (8). Pendygraft's book can be seen as an answer to this question. He demonstrates through this vignette, and throughout his book, that it is not the traditionally conceived literacy—the bible verse—that animates the scene, nor are his literacy sponsors what bring animacy. Instead, it is the mountain that is filled with life. In other words, his answer to the question "where did life go" would be found in the matterings and affects of place.

Indeed, Pendygraft associates literacy with unexpected objects: some that are more obviously connected to text-based literacy, such as tarot cards, knowledge of state-wide water heater regulations, coming out stories, novels, poems, and sexual health advocacy campaigns. But others are less obvious: shorts worn during Pride, a phallic-shaped candle in a tarot reader's trailer closet, scars, drugs, condoms. For Pendygraft, literacy as alphabetic text-based inscription may not be the most important aspect of understanding queer life in Appalachia. Though writing may show up at the scene, it occurs alongside matterings and affects, as well as literacies more broadly conceived, that become part of the networked assemblage of queer experience in Appalachia. In fact, "reading and writing can clash with animate literacies" such that text-based literacy might butt up against the work of "animate literacies," but the "friction it causes still does something in the world" (107).

After a Prologue that lays out the major claims and objectives of the book, Pendygraft's first two chapters lay out his theoretical approach and set up the case studies in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter One "Animacy, Literacy and Queer Agency" includes a brief history of Pendygraft's notion of literacy studies and forwards his main theoretical concept: animate literacies. He grounds this concept on the critique that literacy studies, at least from a Western perspective, have "narrowly focused on the human domain in its treatment of literacy" (xix). Animate literacies, he argues, de-

fines literacy as "energentic exchange rather than only an ability or resource" (4) and includes two elements: literacy matters and literacy affects.

While chronicling literacy approaches—ranging from Royster's notion language as a doing, Gee's definition of literacy bound to being, Brandt's definition of literacy sponsorship, and Alexander's notion of sexual literacy—he amends these theories through posthumanist notions of material agency, where materiality in literacy studies does not refer to only texts and those who create them, but also other objects and matterings. Importantly, Pendygraft draws on queer theory to explain that this shift in perspectives is a kind queering of the scene of literacy: the recentering of literacy toward a "complex web of agential relations" is queer (12)—it can "invert the hierarchies of the inappropriate, the nonhuman, the in order to create new meaning" (13).

After establishing a definition of animate literacies as "an exchange of forces, emanating from a combination of sign systems, performances, and the sensate, which flow between human and nonhuman agents, in and through particular places, in order to effect change, creating new ways of being with and meaning-making" (18), Chapter 2 describes how animate literacies matter in queer Appalachia. As such, Pendygraft both complicates queer and Appalachia through the notion of animacy. Pendygraft, in particular, uses Chen's theory of animacy as a model for disrupting the hierarchy of animacy. Animacy, as defined here, is both a material and affective construct that is shaped by race, sexuality, and other biopolitical factors and, in turn, shapes the world around it, challenging separations or classifications of life and nonlife.

Pendygraft aims, then, to apply this theory of animacies, "to more immediate ways" and to "affective and material conditions of literacy" to "reveal that literacy is, like animacies, nonneutral" (2). Moreover, like Chen, Pendygraft invokes this theory as it intersects with queerness and queer theory relating to nonconventional reproduction, sex, and intimacy as well as just general subversions of normativities (2). In explaining his own use of queer, he says, "I take queering to be disruptive, disorienting, wrought with failures—embracing mess, the profane, and the ugly, all the while knowing that queering can undo selfhood and imagine possibilities not yet actualized" (3). However, he does not shy away from the initial relationship between queerness and nonnormative forms of bodies or sex as an act. The added layers of rhetorical framing, namely the application of new materialist ideas and posthumanist principles, prompt him to offer a new definition of literacy.

An important part of understanding the dynamics on animate literacies in Appalachia specifically is acknowledging that Appalachia is queer. Pendygraft writes, "It is in otherness, strangeness, indeterminacy and resistance that Appalachia and queerness overlap" (28). To attend to animate literacies in Appalachia, he details a method of "metaphoric tracking," which he describes as a queer methodology. As an adaption of Laurie Gries' iconographic tracking, metaphoric tracking centers queer storytelling, and searches for metaphors in queer storytelling because of their inherent articulations of relationality (i.e. how one kind of thing can be understood and experienced in terms of another). He notes, "metaphoric tracking looks for metaphors in queer storytelling as indicators of relationality on all levels" (41). Put another way, "Queer metaphors give us insight into the constellations of actants that comprise animate literacies" (xxi).

Chapter Three "Matters of the Closet" focuses on one queer metaphor: coming out of the closet. Using the method of metaphoric tracking, Pendygraft details the coming out narrative of one of his participants, Justin, an Appalachian man from southeastern Ohio, and describes "the human and non-human literacies" or sponsors "that dissuade and enable his coming out" (xxi). In attending to what he calls "literacy matters of the closet," he poses "questions that grapple with the social, systemic, and/or lived realities that accompany coming out, but also contemplate what other *things* matter in coming out" (54). That is, rather than thinking about "coming out" as the literacy practice or rhetorical act, as other rhetoric and composition scholarship has done, Pendygraft identifies the objects and matterings of Justin's closet, the "unaccounted actants" (54) that serve to animate the literacies of coming out. In doing this, he shows that metaphoric tracking for *literacy matters* highlight "metaphors that permit a glimpse into how being with objects and places in literacy is as equally important as the ability to read and write and all other acts of discernment" (55).

While Chapter Three focuses on *literacy matters*, Chapter Four focuses on *literacy affects*, which allows Pendygraft to further explain his definition of literacy as "an exchange of forces" (73). The chapter highlights the stories of four focal participants, all bisexual cisgender women, and moments of queer affinities in their lives where literacy exists as part of energetic exchange, and the affects of literacy that exist long after the literacy encounter. Here, Pendygraft understands that exchange is not a transaction, but is centered on change that comes through some object's agency. As part of this exploration, he argues that literacy affects are "states of being" as opposed to personal emotions and explains that "affinities" are the "formation of affects when they brush up against bodies" (75). The case studies in this chapter range in emotional tone and in the ways that literacy, queerness, and Appalachia appear in the stories. From Lara's campaign to get condoms into her college dorms to stories of drug use and assault (for which Pendygraft offers trigger warnings), these case studies start from traditional notions of literacy but reveal "how affinities with and for others form through literacy practices and can affect us even after reading and writing is over" (xxi).

Chapter Five, "Carrying Mountains to the Sea," is Pendygraft's concluding chapter and his self-identified "praxis" chapter, where he "stor[ies] a pedagogy of animate literacies" (xxi). However, the chapter also appears more like an autoethnographic account of queer Appalachian animate literacies in Pendygraft's life. The chapter is situated at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, where Pendygraft is a professor, and the Cape Cod Canal, as a place that animates literacy, is central to the pedagogy Pendygraft describes. Pendygraft focuses on his experience teaching his Appalachian Culture undergraduate course, where Appalachia—its mountains, its traditions, its "folxways," and its literacies—are animated through various teaching practices he enacts. To bring Appalachia to Cape Cod, Pendygraft brings agents, human and non-human, that animate Appalachian histories and stories for his students, including the red bandana from which the term "redneck" originates, the banjo, the making of soap, and Appalachian artists including musician Susan Pepper and novelist Carter Sickles. Pendygraft also details how his students animate Appalachia in new ways

through their research, prompting Pendygraft to consider how each place—the ocean of Cape Cod and the mountains of Appalachia—animates, for him, a sense of home.

In this concluding chapter, Pendygraft notes that Appalachia animated his own literacy: "Appalachia has funneled the flow of this entire manuscript" (73), taking him in directions he would not have otherwise planned. Therefore, Pendygraft's work follows existing work in Appalachian rhetorics and literacies, but rather than focus solely on class dynamics, poverty, or illiteracy stereotypes, he focuses on the queerness of Appalachia, particularly on the fact, he claims, that there is no one Appalachia. As he acknowledges, part of the difficulty of studying Appalachia is that it does not exist as a singular place. It exists instead in the plural stretching from New England through parts of the Midwest and into the Deep South existing in as a multitudinous place of queer and/or strange contradictions rather than the sort of simplicity that the singular term Appalachia implies.

For this reason, community literacy scholars and literacy researchers more broadly will find that Pendygraft's manuscript offers conceptual vocabulary for thinking about how communities and community literacies are "animated" by human and non-human actors. Importantly, Pendygraft also offers both alignment with and challenges to the notion of community literacy as place-based, whether as bounded spatially or made through literacy exchanges or the circulation of public rhetoric. He notes that "place takes a greater significance with animate literacies, in terms of both where we study literacy and how we theorize its goal in treating place as actively participating in the study" (xix). And importantly, Pendygraft notes, Appalachia is queer and Appalachia has animacy. Because of this, Pendygraft's work might prompt community literacy practitioners and scholars to explore emergent and animated notions of place further.

Community literacy scholars will find resonance in Pendygraft's focus on community knowledge over institutional knowledge, in methods for collecting and analyzing stories, and in his understanding of community as underscored by relationality and affective affinities. In particular, he unpacks the relationship between self and place, "affected and mediated through" literacy practices (95). While some may consider the small sample size as unable to provide generalizable research, Pendygraft could easily counter that this may well be the nature of queer research and research in queer Appalachia. At the same time, Pendygraft's analysis squeezes out insight from each piece of a participant's story, noting animate materiality that might not otherwise be acknowledged as part of reading the world and the self. The work that Pendygraft is doing is trying to carve out an academic space for the messy, painful, scary, and strange realities of literacy, and he smudges the neat lines of traditional literacy scholarship beautifully with dick candles, water heaters, tarot cards, and all the incidentals in between.

Work Cited

Leander, Kevin, and Christian Ehret, eds. *Affect in Literacy Learning and Teaching: Pedagogies, Politics and Coming to Know*. Routledge, 2019.