#donttagyourhate: Elastic Literacies and Writing as Reparation

#donttagyourhate: Sexual Subjectivities, Writing as Reparation, and the On- / Offline Queer-Politics of Everyday Life

Overview and Purposes:

K-12 Educational research concerned with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth typically focuses on facets of curricular inclusion in humanities based classrooms. Scholarship at the intersection of English education and gender and sexuality studies has focused on complexities of moral practice and attitudinal disposition. For example, education scholars focusing on LGBT youth encourage continued teacher activism in formal English education spaces (Blackburn & Clark, 2010), confronting intolerance and teaching acceptance through literature shifts the paradigm and defines the teacher as being and becoming an ally and activist. Similarly, authors argue that the inclusion of and space for queer and LGBT-oriented literatures create spaces of tolerance and acceptance in combating homophobia in both in school and out of school contexts (Blackburn, 2003; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005). While necessary, there is a line of query missing, wherein queer is understood as a cultural category, and the investigation of LGBT and queer community literacy practices are employed in understanding the self and navigating the larger world of everyday (in)equality across space, place, and context. This project aims to marshal some of these lines of inquiry concerning the multiplicity of youth identities across contexts by examining the following questions:

1. How do LGBT and queer youth navigate identities of difference and gender (in)equality through their encounters with community languages, literacies, and literatures?
2. How, if at all, do contexts of place (e.g., an out-of-school youth program, a gay-straight alliance, a microblogging platform, etc.) map out and / or position queer identities of difference across place?

Perspectives and Modes of Inquiry

“For starters I’m gay. I just thought whoever is reading this should know that before you start scrolling down my blog and see: gay marriage this and equality that….I see Tumblr basically (sic) as a kingdom, forget kingdom Tumblr is more like Wonderland….in this blog [my only blog], I write things that happen in my life. I also upload/ re-blog pictures that inspire me or just catch my attention. Lastly I upload music that I adore. I hope you enjoy it :D “

(Zeke – Tumblr Bio and Introduction)

“One thing, every gay guy on earth has a tumblr account. all of us. haha….Tumblr is [a] stronghold for LGBT people…” (Ben – excerpt taken from e-mail correspondence)

Youth are creating new and innovative spaces of queer visibility across contexts of space and place. More specifically, and as the participant excerpts above illustrate, youth are becoming more connected across digital platforms and are navigating everyday injustices of gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, etc. through acts of collective action, community organizing, and youth activism. Employing a critical sociocultural theoretical framework (Morrell, 2004; Lewis Enciso, & Moje, 2007) wherein many of the “post” discourses are useful in examining difference, power, subjectivity, and context through the use of everyday literacy and language practices, this study explores how youth navigate (in)equality and use writing as both a means for reparation and an action for collective community building that fosters youth activism and alliance.
Drawing from ethnographic and discourse analytic data from multiple sites (a Gay Straight Alliance [GSA] in a small Midwestern city as well as the digital environment of the microblog Tumblr, wherein all participating youth write) I focus on the connective perspective that such insight could provide to educators interested in cultural identities, sexual subjectivities, and the ontological process of writing. Moje et al. (2006) cites this shifting connective landscape in writing:

in a globalized, increasingly diverse world, people move across discourse communities, seeking to gain entrance, while existing members may be seeking to retain control over the community or to retain the community’s power and access to resources, vis-à-vis other competing communities (p. 17)

Thus, the dialogue at the center of this paper traces literacy interactions across contexts. While I, as the author define literacy as both an ideological practice and system of representation (text-based, visual, multimodal, etc.) enacted and indexed by individuals to communicate meaning, I am also very aware of literacy as “skill.” Thus, in this study, the hybrid space of literacy as “both/and” translates the global to the local, the institutional to the personal, and the perceived to the real. In conjunction with the aforementioned framing, these flows of language and literacy practice illuminate how contexts of power and subjectivity are influenced by youth navigating the everyday queer politics of gender inequality and homophobia.

Methods:
This study features qualitative case studies (Haas Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 2004) highlighting the experience of five focal participants engaging in a Gay Straight Alliance focused on community literacy and the empowerment of those who take on LGBT and queer youth identities. It can be considered “multi-site” insofar as I researched the connective lives these youth lead on social networking sites and microblogging platforms such as Tumblr. This multiple case analysis provides in-depth examinations of phenomena such as how the implicit and explicit curricula inform youth engagement with languages, literatures, and literacies as well as survey the social fault lines of difference present in school spaces, an out-of-school GSA, as well as the digital environments through which they participate. Additionally, it explores how youth participants employ community literacies and language work in their everyday lives as they navigate gender and sexual (in)equality.

- **Context:** Gay-Straight alliances and other out-of-school queer-oriented youth centers offer LGBT, queer, and allied youth intensive programming focused on education, leadership, and engagement. Many of these youth spaces utilize community literacies and literatures to foster self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic self-confidence. These programs provide queer-oriented “safe spaces” for youth. They also offer researchers a heuristic insofar as they examine issues of equality and human rights, exploring how such educative spaces help shape and transform language and literacy (and, by extension, how these spaces inform the formal English Language Arts classroom) for marginalized youth. However, as we know, youth are living more connective lives (Leander, 2008) than ever before. For this reason, I have also studied and become a participant observer in the digital environments the youth inhabit, with Tumblr as the microblogging site of primacy.

- **Participants and Data Collection:** Through consultation with teachers and associated staff, I selected (and collected preliminary background information on) five focal participants
for participation in this study. Prior to, I secured consent and assent from all participating youth. Throughout the academic year, and for the entirety of the study, I worked as a participant-observer, engaging with the program’s discourse and activities. During the spring semester, I conducted 3 semi-structured active interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002), collected multimodal student work, wrote field notes, as well as textually analyzed the student’s writing and participation in the microblog Tumblr, an environment that all focal youth discussed during the first interview. Two months after the completion of the spring semester, I conducted a final interview with youth to begin to connect how these multiple spaces and places, both perceived and conceived, interacted with their larger schooling experiences as K-12 students.

• Data Analysis and Focus: Data was analyzed with a particular focus on understanding how these LGBT and queer youth engage with community language(s), literacies, and literature(s) across space and context. Building upon the work of aforementioned scholars such as Blackburn, Britzman, and Clark, I began with open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) analyzing how these LGBT, queer, and ally youth shifted their discourse identities (Gee, 2001) and “ways of operating” (DeCerteau, 1988) in navigating (in)equality across the varying contexts of space and place. Using descriptive indicators of inequality, identity/subjectivity, and types of literacy that emerged in open coding, I then moved to axial coding and collapsed how types of literacy work operated and were enacted across focal themes. This crystalized and brought to fruition types of practice(s) encompassed by all youth participants. By investigating how aims of combatting gendered and sexual inequality are taken up discursively within the field of formal and informal language and literacy learning, I sought to explore how moral geographies of knowledge and sexual subjectivities “sat” in spaces – creating social fault lines that prohibit the formal learning space from being considered safe as well as highlighting the elastic literacies provided in queer narrative rhetorical practices of LGBT youth.

Results:

While the perceived and real gender inequality that exists for participants are central to the overarching analysis and discussion in multiple ways, and operationalized through composing and writing (mapping “safe spaces, group zining, etc.) I was most engaged with understanding the conceived space of the microblog Tumblr, as it was the central platform for writing and composing that youth discussed as a counter to bias and homophobia.

Figure 1 – Safe Space Map of School

Figure 2 – Zine Page from Participant

#donttagyourhate: Tumblr as New Queer Literacy Practice
Four thematic modes and tactics of literacy work as a counter to inequality emerged from the analysis of group talk, youth writing, and interviews. These modes, #hashtagpublics as community literacies, remix as resistance, writing as reparation, and artifactual literacies as operationalizing discovery of self arose across all focal youth participants. Alongside of these tactics and modes of operating, youth utilized these spaces saturated with literacy through three ways: position in space, action, and function. [These are summarized in Table 1.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic(s) / Modes of Operating through Literacy Work</th>
<th>Position in Space</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#hashtagpublics as Community Literacies</td>
<td>(a) conceived space</td>
<td>Youth construct, composing and writing texts as communities and counterpublics</td>
<td>Utilizing writing and composing as a queer cultural practice for community organizing. Youth create #hashtag counterpublics for critiquing gender inequality and homophobia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remix as Resistance</td>
<td>(b) conceived and perceived</td>
<td>Youth compose / revise, remixing and reblogging as writing that resists hegemony and dominant cultural logics</td>
<td>Composing multimodeal remixes of previous youth’s blog posts to combat homophobia, gender inequality, and dominant cultural logics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing as Reparation</td>
<td>(c) perceived and real space</td>
<td>Youth personalize and signify, writing and composing as ontological process; as healing</td>
<td>Personalizing writing and composing as a process of cathartic healing and reparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifactual Literacies as Operationalizing Discovery of Self</td>
<td>(d) real space</td>
<td>Youth describe and explore, using artifacts as platforms for identity work</td>
<td>Exploring and describing everyday cultural artifacts as a way to write the self/selves across real space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the work enacted in this digital third-space of Tumblr is liberatory, in the sense that youth are using literacy to combat inequality, I do not mean to suggest that it is either wholly liberatory or oppressive. Youth are using the platform as a space wherein literacy functions in ways that are unsanctioned in the everyday space of the classroom.

**Significance and Relation to Inquiry Areas**

Too often, LGBT and queer students’ identities become a lived corporeal experience of hate and homophobia rather than an empowered sense of self. While scholars have questioned the role of building a culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy for youth and teachers to access ( Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Sleeter, 2001) we have yet to fully bring to fruition a framework for working with youth in a culturally sustainable way ( Paris, 2012), where interstices of difference such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality are investigated in ways that value pluralism and cultural difference. This project marshaled some of these lines of inquiry concerning the multiplicity of youth identities as well as drew from and expanded upon the critical work conducted in fields like cultural studies and English education. As the American Educational Research Association releases the first handbook on “LGBT and Queer Research in Education” (Graves et al., Forthcoming), greater attention must be paid (and further research conducted as it relates) to
LGBT and queer youth cultures, especially as they pertain to studies of context. Youth research must respond to and work against the heteronormative code of knowledge that “renders ambiguous, indirect, and unstable ways of signifying [queer sexual] desire invisible” (Driver, 2007, p.308). This project, and the work I expect will grow from this research will further scholarly, critical, political, and policy based discourses about quality learning experiences for all students in all contexts.
References:


Britzman, D. P. & Gilbert, J. (2004). What will have been said about gayness in teacher education? *Teaching Education, 15*(1), 81-96.


