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Fierce: Black Queer Literacies of Survival

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Influenced by Black feminist and queer scholars, my dissertation focuses on how Black and queer people have made interventions through language and performance to survive larger racist and homophobic forces. Despite critical scholarship on the literacies of both Black and queer communities, there has been limited research that brings together these two perspectives and bodies of research. The foundation of my study is based on audio/video interviews and participant observation: I interviewed participants from 2013 Washington, DC, Black Gay Pride and 2017 Harlem Pride, focusing specifically on their understanding of three terms: “reading,” “throwing shade,” and “pullin’ trade.”

The central questions guiding this study are: In what ways do Black queer people rework language to create community? How and why do they engage in language practices such as reading and throwing shade? To what extent do such practices function as a rite of passage in the Black queer community? How do participants use narrative to explain a range of language practices central to Black queer people?

I argue that Black queer people practice what I call “fierce literacies”—that is, a type of oppositional consciousness that allows Black queer people to riff off of static ideas of language and literacy to both communicate with and create community amongst friends. Throughout this dissertation, I contextualize fierce literacies within a Black oral tradition. I place research participants in conversation with other Black queer and femme voices in popular culture in order to illustrate these practices as a part of a distinct literacy in the Black queer community. I see fierce literacies as an umbrella term to conceptualize the various ways Black queer people have had to reread and refashion literacy in order to navigate a system that regularly oppresses,
silences, and erases their knowledges, histories, and lived experiences. Finally, my research contributes to understandings of how Black queer people use diverse language practices in order to survive.
FIERCE: BLACK QUEER LITERACIES OF SURVIVAL

by

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Dissertation
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First, I would like to thank God for guiding me through this doctoral program and this research project. This dissertation is not merely an intellectual exercise but also a socio-political tool to give voice to my community. First, I would like to thank both of my parents—not just because it is customary to thank those who have sacrificed, supported, and prayed for you to have the opportunities that you take advantage. My parents have also served as inspiration for my research. My father is central to my research of masculinity, gender, and sexuality because he was my first example of what a man was supposed to be. Before I read the works of hooks, Pritchard, Guy-Sheftall, Neal or Reid-Pharr, my father guided me to understand what is at stake and how to navigate the world as a Black male. Traditionally, mothers are viewed as the first teachers of the child. While I do not remember my first teachings, my mother has always played the role of nurturer from the womb to a week ago when I was threatening to quit school and sell pottery on the side of the road. Through my mother, I have been able to take my understanding of Black feminist thought and practice beyond merely classroom banter to an alternative worldview, which allows me to appreciate the world and women in my life in whole new way.

I would like to thank my co-advisors for their invaluable support through this long process. Patrick W. Berry has served as a mentor and worked with me tirelessly on conference presentations, article proposals, job materials, and the seemingly unlimited drafts of my dissertation. Gwen Pough also served as a mentor and has helped me find my voice as a writer by offering feedback, challenging my ideas, and essentially introducing me to the scholars that would become my bibliography and colleagues. I would also like to thank Eileen Schell, Brice
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I dedicate this dissertation to Black queer youth, who I will never meet but struggle every day to articulate their complex selves into a world that wants them to remain silent and unseen.
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A FIERCE INTRODUCTION

… please realize that we all, at one time or another, have lusted to walk a ballroom floor. So give the patrons and the contestants, you know, a round of applause for nerve, ’cause with y’all vicious motherfuckers, it do take nerve. Believe me. We’re not going to be shady, just fierce.

—Junior LaBeija, *Paris is Burning*

In this dissertation, I examine what I call fierce literacies. The phrase “fierce literacies” is an attempt at conceptualizing the relationship Black queer people have with each other and their critical reading, refashioning, and performing of language and appearance for survival. By fierce literacies, I mean the close reading of dominant and sometimes competing scripts of race and sexuality and how Black queer people navigate and riff against them on a daily basis. It is about examining how race and sexuality intersect and inform the ways in which we speak, perform, and create space. My explication of fierce literacies centers around three Black gay slang terms/discursive practices: *reading, throwing shade,* and *pullin’ trade.* The purpose of this chapter is to introduce these three terms and to describe why they are literacies and particularly fierce literacies. I also describe my methods of analysis and provide an overview of the chapters.

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1 In this project, I distinguish *reading,* the performance of insult in Black queer communities, from reading, the translating of words on a page through the use of italics. For more on this, see E. Patrick Johnson (1995 125).
The phrase fierce literacies is also my attempt at conceptualizing the relationship Black women and queer people or “The Girls” have with each other and their critical reading, refashioning and performing of language and appearance for survival. Black straight women, gay men, lesbians, White gays, trans people have and often occupy the same discursive spaces and communities. For this reason, it impossible to separate the literacy practices of these groups, especially since the groups mutually exist at the intersections of multiple identities and suffer racial, class-based, gendered and sexual oppressions. I use “The Girls” as an organizing construct for two reasons. Colloquially, Black gay men often call each other “girl” and refer to gay men more generally as “The Girls.” Theoretically, I borrow from Ruth Nicole Brown’s discussion of Black girls in Hear Our Truths. In Hear Our Truths, Brown examines Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT), an after-school space for celebrating the creative potential of Black girls as producers of culture and knowledge through art and reflection on their lived experiences.

I use “The Girls” as an organizing construct to deliberately honor and demonstrate the relationship between Black women and Black queer people. Fierce literacies continue a larger discussion of the ways Black women have used multiple forms of literacy, such as essay, academic writing, discourse and Hip-Hop as a ways to survive and gain agency (Royster, Richardson, Pough). Like Brown’s work, my project “builds on women-of-color feminisms, hip-hop feminism, womanism, critical ethnic studies, and scholarship on Black girlhood and critical pedagogy” to celebrate the genius of “The Girls” and fierce literacies in their context. I consider fierce literacies to be one of the “radical interpretive sensibilities” that can be unearthed through celebrating and honoring the lived experiences of “The Girls” (4).

While “The Girls” engage in a wide variety of literate practices, both specific and non-specific to Black Queers, this project focuses on an approach to literacy that is informed by a
larger need for survival and to communicate multiple messages to multiple audiences simultaneously. Fierce literacies is a larger umbrella term to conceptualize the ways Black queer people refashion language, gender performance, sexual identity and appearance, often to subvert meaning, for fun, survival and to subversively communicate in the presence of interlopers. Even though I see many Black cisgender women as key to my theorization of these literacy practices, my ongoing research has suggested that throwing shade and pullin’ trade have a special currency amongst Black gay men and transwomen, which several of my participants speak to later on in this dissertation.

In order to engage with how fierce literacies of critical reading and refashioning function in the material lives of “The Girls,” I will first explain fierce as term. Then I will engage with how fierce literacies function discursively by discussing reading and throwing shade in a larger African American rhetorical tradition of signifying. Next, I will discuss how this discussion of fierce literacies fits in a larger conversation in the composition field about Black queer being historically misread and having to refashion identity to survive. Lastly, I will briefly discuss my dissertation chapters, where I will examine how fierce literacies play out in different spaces where Black women and queer people exist.

*Fierce Readings and Refashioning Literacy*

By using fierce, I am engaging with fierceness and fear in Black and queer of color communities. I use fierce because it is a popular term in larger American gay culture for something or someone controlled, and intensively, aggressively or stunningly fabulous or beat (think of beating one’s face with makeup). The gay themed television channel Logo uses “fearce” as a portmanteau to advertise their block of scary movies with queer sensibilities such as *Fear, Rocky Horror Picture*
Show and Misery. The mixture of masculine and feminine traits in the gender performances of these bodies speaks to the multiple and often-contradictory messages sent in this approach, which I will unpack later. Presenting as fierce is often a goal for many people, in and out of queer spaces. I use fear because the word engages in the grim realities that many working class, people of color, and queer people face at the hands of the larger patriarchal society.

In his book Looking for Leroy, Mark Anthony Neal builds on Seth Clark Silberman’s theorizations about fierce in his discussion of Gene Anthony Ray “Leroy” from the 1980s television show Fame. “I evoke the term ‘fierce legibility’ in relation to Leroy’s visual legibility—his cornrows, his red ‘hot pants,’ and the lilting sway of his hips—which could mark Leroy as gay. (2)” In this description, Leroy’s butch queen appearance and performance disrupts ideas about Black masculinity, as well as masculinity and femininity as diametrically apposed and only appearing on the appropriate gendered body. Neal goes on to express a desire for Ray and Leroy’s queerness confirmed in order to contradict the “interchangeable fictions” of other Black television characters of pimps and crime or bougie Black male characters like Heathcliff Huxtable and Frank Parrish from The Cosby Show and Frank’s Place. “As such, I would like to suggest that Gene Anthony Ray’s Leroy represented the foundation for a queering of black masculinity in contemporary popular culture” (3). In the eyes of Neal and many other Black men, Leroy’s gender performance was fierce in the sense that it was confrontational and complicated static images of Black manhood. In his dissertation “Fierce: Performance, Creativity, and the Theory of the Fabulous Class,” Madison Moore similarly looks at fierce as an aesthetic an enabling, disruptive mode of performance rooted in the expression of creativity through the personas of Tina Turner and voguers from the Black and Latino Ballroom scene.
Fierce in this study is an amalgamation of the confidence of a Ballroom performer on the runway with the fear they may feel why trying to read the safety of their route home. By refashioning, I am borrowing from Eric Pritchard’s discussion of Ella Mosley’s (mis)use of literacy through identity formation as an individual act of resistance and survival, which I will discuss more fully later in this dissertation. Specifically, the fear of being mistreated because of one’s race or sexual orientation forces many Black queer people to think critically about and often refashion how they present themselves through their language, sexual identity, and gender performance. The critical readings and refashioning works in conversation with larger racial, sexual, and gender politics, which informs the presentation of self through identity and performance.

My analysis draws on a wide range of sources. It focuses on literacy narratives collected at 2013 Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride and 2017 Harlem Pride, academic texts, personal conversations, documentaries, and various media from pop culture. I also engage with my own literacy narrative, exploring it with and against the narratives expressed in Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary Paris is Burning, an exploration of the golden age (the late 1980s and early 1990s) of the Harlem Ballroom scene, to demonstrate the various ways, as I see it, fierce literacies are learned and performed.

I use fierce because it is a popular term in larger American gay culture for something or someone controlled, and intensively, aggressively or stunningly fabulous or beat (think of beating one’s face with makeup). The mixture of masculine and feminine traits in the gender performances of these bodies speaks to the multiple, layered, often-contradictory readings of discourse, performance, and space. Presenting as fierce or in control is often a goal for many people in and out of queer spaces. For me, fierce as a cool or cold aesthetic also engages in the
grim realities that many working-class people of color and queer people face at the hands of the larger patriarchal society.

Bridging scholarship in literacy studies, composition and rhetoric, as well as performance studies, this section speaks to the complicated ways Black and/or queer people engage with language and literacy in their communities. I also engage with scholarship that demonstrates how Black and/or queer people have confronted dominant misreadings about Black, female, and/or queer bodies through signifying or academic writing. Many of these scholars use their experiences along with pop culture to demonstrate misuses of literacies. I see fierce literacies as forms of resistance. Related to this, I contend that it is important to recognize that the language and literacies that Black and/or queer people use inform how they see themselves, Black queer communities, and the larger world.

My engagement with fierce literacies continues the work of scholars who trouble static notions of reading/literacy, as begun in the last section, and of race and sexuality. Fierce is an amalgamation of the confidence of a Ballroom performer on the runway with the fear they may feel on their route home. In some ways, such scenes represent the collision of two worlds—between the haves and have nots—between the opulent world of the ballroom and desperation of the streets. But what fierce literacies are about is highlighting the contradictions, of offering a more complicated reading of discourse, performance, and space,

Throughout my analysis of these sources, I identify several literacy narratives, which provide clear explanations of the terms themselves (reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade) while offering a glimpse into the material conditions that give the terms traction in multiple communities. I explore how fierce literacies can contribute to existing conversations about literacy and rhetoric and the multiple ways Black, female, and/or queer bodies read and are read
inside and outside the academy. Ultimately, I argue that reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade are discursive performances that are part of the fierce literacies that Black queer people deploy to survive.

This dissertation engages with Black LGBTQ people in their worlds and with their words. Fierce literacies offer a valuable approach for conceptualizing Black LGBTQ people’s reading and refashioning of language, performance, and space for survival. By focusing on reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade, I have attempted to highlight tactics employed by Black LGBTQ people to respond and often resist the literacy normativity foisted on them. D.C. Black Pride and Harlem Pride are sites where I knew I would be able to talk with out Black queer people, who were familiar with reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade. Paris is often referenced by Black queer people, including several of my participants, as an influence and reference point within the community.

This fierce introduction has also provided a foundation for the rest of the study. In chapter one, “Finding Fierce: Refashioning Literacy for Survival,” I discuss reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade and describe why they are literacies and particularly fierce literacies. Ultimately, I argue that reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade are fierce literacy practices, which often speak back to static understandings of language and sexuality and reflect a larger membership in the Black queer community. I also describe my methods of analysis, which draw on audio and video interviews, participant observation, and rhetorical analysis, before providing an overview of the chapters.

In Chapter two, “How to Survive Gay World,” I rhetorically analyze the film Paris Is Burning. Throughout the film, the performers, through their language, performances and the spaces they create, force the viewer to reimagine static ideas of how gender and class work in our
society. I highlight the film as an exemplar of how these communities refashion literacy. I also consider how the concept of ancestorship, which runs throughout the documentary and the Harlem Ballroom that inspires it, provides insights into fierce literacies as a critical intervention for survival.

Chapter three, “Throwing Shade in the Park,” focuses on how reading and throwing shade function discursively as fierce literacies in Black queer life. I analyze literacy narratives from my trip to Washington D.C.’s 2013 Black Pride festival. I attended the festival and interviewed eight Black LGBTQ people and they shared literacy narratives and how they came to know and understand reading and throwing shade. Through these literacy narratives, I show how Black Queer literacy and vernacular function in day-to-day interaction with both queer and non-queer people, as well as in popular culture. In their narratives, Black LGBTQ people display the type of on-the-spot refashioning of language and identity that takes place during reading and throwing shade. Their physical and verbal enactments also illustrate how performances of gender, race and sexuality are refashioned for survival.

In Chapter four, “Pullin’ Trade: Sexual Identity, Ambiguity, and Literacy Normativity,” I explicate “pullin’ trade” as a fierce literacy by critically engaging with literacy narratives about pullin’ trade. I focus on Black gay men and transwomen at 2017 Harlem Pride. I consider how they see themselves and the larger discourse around pullin’ “straight” men for gay sex. I found that the men refashion sexual literacies around orientation and gender performance. In Chapter five, I engage with three teachable moments or literacy narratives to illustrate how discussing sexual and cultural literacies is not safe but very important work in the composition and women and gender studies classrooms.
In my concluding chapter, I attempt to synthesize the arguments from prior chapters and argue that the field of rhetoric and composition needs to include more of the voices and bodies that survive at the intersection of multiple identities and competing discourses. Weaved into my analysis will be my own analysis of myself as an out Black gay male feminist working as a graduate teaching assistant in the humanities. I focus on my experiences with specific pop culture texts and assignments to discuss how I created a space for my students and me to think through race, gender, and sexuality.
Before explaining how literacy functions and is reimagined in Black queer communities, it is necessary to start with a discussion of literacy more broadly. When I use the term *literacy*, I draw on understandings of literacy put forth by Eric Pritchard and David Kirkland. Pritchard’s discussion of Ella Mosely’s literacy helps me to understand literacy as something beyond words on the page to a larger, more encompassing culturally-informed understanding of meaning making and knowing. In bringing together the work of Sojourner Truth and Paulo Freire, he writes, “The remarks of Truth and Freire each inform my definition of literacy as a sociocultural situated practice of meaning making, including, though not exclusively, reading, writing, and formal literacy skills” (“This is Not” 282). Black queer literacies are often performed and constructed from, in conversation with, and in resistance to problematic (and limited) notions of who Black queer people are.

Kirkland, in his discussion of young Black men’s literacies, sees literacy acquisition as organic and a consequence of practice and context. He writes that literacy is a “consequence of those natural human drives that we may call the basics—pleasure [flow], play, curiosity and creativity are prerequisites to one’s love of learning (to read and write)” (8). Kirkland reminds us that literacy never takes place only in the classroom, and in pointing to those spaces outside of school, he opens up a space for richer understandings of literacy.

When I discuss reading, throwing shade and pullin’ trade as literacies, I am also borrowing from Paul Prior and Jody Shipka’s (2003) discussion of literate activity. They argue
against the idea of literate activity only being understood as specialized writing cognition that takes place in an academic context:

Rather, literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world, forms of life. It is about histories (multiple, complexly interanimating trajectories and domains of activity), about the (re)formation of persons and social worlds, about affect and emotion, will and attention. (181)

Prior and Shipka move us as a field to think through literacy as something constantly changing and not limited to literal reading and writing on paper. They also encourage us to think through how histories and social worlds inform the ways people form and reform themselves. They go on to say, “It is especially about the ways we not only come to inhabit made-worlds, but constantly make our worlds—the ways we select from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds we inhabit (182).” It is this (re)structuring or refashioning for survival that I see in the literacy practices of Black LGBT people as I take up in the next section.2

Methods and Methodology

This research project could not exist apart from my own life history. I occupy multiple subjectivities—Black, queer, fraternity brother, Christian, graduate student—positions that may appear seemingly contradictory to some, yet they all color each other. I have worked on a personal level to disrupt static and oppressive understandings of gender, race, and sexuality. I see

2 See also Royster for an account of how Black women, through their writings, intervening and disrupting dominant discourse for social change.
such practices as fierce literacies, which are enacted in the Black queer community as well as in culture more broadly.

I will go into my methods as necessary in each chapter and offer an overview here. My interviews from Washington D.C. 2013 Black Gay Pride and 2017 Harlem Pride, along with accounts represented in *Paris is Burning*, contain several literacy narratives that help me flesh out how fierce literacies are acquired and performed. I selected Pride and Black Pride events because I wanted to talk to people who were out queer people who were knowledgeable about Black gay culture and language. The history of Pride celebrations also connects with fierce literacies as a form of resistance. As discussed in Joseph Lovett’s documentary *Gay Sex in the 1970s*, queer people would often meet secretly at bars and clubs, which were routinely raided by the police. The police would arrest the patrons and the next day they would print their names in the paper. On Saturday, June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar at 43 Christopher Street, New York City. Instead of being arrested, the patrons fought back. Trans activist Marsha P. Johnson is often credited as being the first to fight back against the police. The fight bled into the streets and rioting continued for the next few days. Pride events are celebrated all over the world in commemoration of this gay liberation event. Washington D.C. Black Pride (the first Black pride event) in 1991 and Harlem Pride in 2010 were organized to celebrate and advocate for SGL (Same Gender Loving) and LGBTQ people of African descent.

Most of the participants from my interviews and those relayed through supplemental sources were Black and Brown queer men and transgender women in their twenties. Due to the brief nature of my dialogue with most of the participants (15-20 minutes), I was not able to get

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3 I also interviewed one white gay man and transwoman.
definitive personal information like sexual orientation, age, or gender identity but I was able to access valuable information about the literacy practices I address in my study. I recruited my participants using a snowball methodology. At each of the Pride events, I approached an individual who looked social. I asked them if they knew what shade or trade was and interviewed them if they said yes. Then, I asked if they had any friends that they thought would be good to interview as well. Their personal stories, across time and space, are important because they speak to a larger communal knowledge about Black queer people, both those who are with us and those who came before. While my focus is primarily on Black gay men and trans women, I want to stress that their lives do not exist isolated from other populations. During my interviews, participants would often say, “You know how it is…” because I am a Black gay man as well, but they would also consider many other groups as part of their larger community. They would also use our interviews to speak back—that is, to correct dominant readings or assumptions about these communities.

In addition to the narratives expressed in the interviews, I also engage with my own fierce literacy narrative and various pop culture texts that inform my understanding of this phenomenon. I use a mixture of methods to engage with various literacy narratives. These include interviews, rhetorical analysis of popular cultural texts, and personal narrative, which help illuminate reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade within a larger communal context. Each of the texts that I analyzed were either constructed by Black queer people or were actively circulated in the community. I combine these fragmented narratives to tell a more nuanced story of how I came to understand these literacy practices and myself as a Black gay man in his late twenties—and more specifically, as one of the bad bitches whose stories are represented in these pages. I believe it is necessary to know this aspect of my identity in order to understand my
relationship with this material—the participants, the communities, and texts I examine. I live in and navigate the spaces where my research takes place. It is often the connections to my life outside of the academy that allow me to understand and explicate how fierce literacies are performed.

I engage in mixed methodology for data collection with this dissertation. Similar to Jeffrey McCune and David Kirkland, I see myself as a participant observer, in the sense that I was interviewing participants and studying the scene at the Pride as an active participant and member of the Black queer community. Kirkland discusses a similar phenomenon as the “I-us” reflexivity in *A Search Past Silence*. As a Black man, he empathizes with the young Black men in his study and sees their stories in connection to his own. He argues that educators should be cognizant of the complex literacy practices of Black male students who have long been misread by the field and that such knowledge will help them better engage in the classroom:

> Looking into myself and impelling a coherent image of my own Black masculinity onto theirs, I was able to see them, to situate the young men in a history of readers and writers who espouse literate dispositions based on particular social and cultural models for engagement. (3)

Kirkland follows the lives of a group of young Black men from 2003-2006 and again in 2008 and 2009. The length of time Kirkland spent with them and the relationships he builds with them informed how he saw their literacy function. A similar phenomenon is at play with my work in the sense that I, too, am exploring particular models of social and cultural engagement in Black gay life. A lifetime of practicing fierce literacies that include reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade has helped me synthesize the material I explore and speak to in this dissertation.
More specifically, I see this analysis as an exploration of a somewhat less explored type of literacy narrative, one that involves a sexual/cultural rite of passage. While scholars in literacy studies have urged us to look beyond the classroom, to consider situated literacy practices (for example, Brandt, Street, Gee), there has more recently been a focus on the embodied literacies related to sexualities (Alexander; Alexander and Rhodes; McBeth; and Pritchard). Increasingly, scholars have looked to narrative representations of literacy, particular literacy as represented in cultural scripts (for example, Eldred and Mortensen; Soliday; and Rutten and Soetaert). Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetaert argue that literacy narratives provide insight into the way literacy is acquired and practiced. They write, “From an ethnographic perspective, literacy narratives can thus be approached as stories that document ‘rites of passage,’ as individuals discover and embrace particular cultural or institutional identities and reject others” (648). In my own experience, as well as in those featured throughout this dissertation, learning how to read, throw shade and pull trade were rites of passages into a Black queer community and identity.

This turn to narrative can be seen in how those studied responded when asked to define the three terms. For example, when I asked participants to explain what shade is, they often provided a narrative as explanation. They would say things like “throwing shade is when....” Or they would tell stories about interactions between them and their friends. These narratives, which demonstrate fierce literacies, illustrate the riffs and discursive play that Black queer people employ to survive.

**Fierce Reading: Signifying and Talking Back to Misreadings** In embracing a more expansive view of literacy, we need to look at the pioneering work of Geneva Smitherman, who explores
the multilayered language practices of African Americans. In describing the dozens, for example, she writes:

This verbal ritual has been around in the linguistic-cultural repertoire of African American Language speakers since enslavement. It is a style of highly exaggerated, hyperbolic talk that takes place among social intimates. The conversational objective is to flaunt your verbal skills, to keep going until you shut everybody else down. (76)

In describing the dozens, Smitherman points to a type of signifying. Other types of signifying include snapping, reading, and throwing shade. In *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates traces the folkloric origins of the African-American cultural and rhetorical practice of “signifying.” He uses the works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed, as well as the trickster folk tales of Signifying Monkey, Esu-Elegbara, and the trope of the talking book to explicate how African American rhetors play on meaning and reuse previous motifs but alter them to “signify” new meaning to survive and outsmart the predator. The practice of signifying encourages us to think through and perform literacies that engage and signify multiple readings and meanings, both specific to and riffing off of the context.

While Black people’s use of signifying is often understood as a form of play, I highlight fierce literacies, such as reading, throwing shade and pullin’ trade as playful and necessary for survival. Gates draws on a passage from Frederick Douglass’ autobiography in which he discusses the signifying that took place in the songs of Blacks during slavery to demonstrate the subversion and double meaning at play in the tradition. Douglass discusses the songs as being made up on the spot; the choruses were often read as indiscernible but were full of meaning. Gates quotes Douglass: “I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the North, to find
persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to think of a greater mistake” (73). Gates goes on to argue that Blacks would encode and reverse meaning using “antiphonal structures” in order to survive. Another example he uses is Blacks’ usage of the hymn “Steal Away to Jesus” to signal that there was going to be a religious meeting. White slave masters were against Black slaves having their own meetings, so they had to encode the meeting notice in a song. This play on meaning is central to fierce literacies on a verbal and embodied level. For example, reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade are terms that can be taken literally in white heterosexual and/or mainstream spaces but signify new meaning in Black and queer contexts.

Rhetoric and African American studies scholar Charles Nero builds on the works of Gates and Smitherman in his discussion of signifying amongst Black gay men. Nero examines the works of Black gay writers, such as Samuel Delaney, Essex Hemphill, and George Wolfe. He focuses on representation of desire, the Black religious experience, and gender configurations as examples of the ways Black gay men have altered the aesthetics of signifyiing and the African American Literary tradition. Nero uses the character Miss Roj from Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* as an example of how Black gay men signify in literature. He argues that Wolfe signifies off of the prologue of Ellison’s novel to make a commentary about the alienation of poor Black people. Nero compares Miss Roj’s opening monologue to the first two sentences of *Invisible Man*. Miss Roj distances herself from “your regular oppressed American Negro.” She introduces herself in a grandiose manner as an extraterrestrial from another galaxy like all “snap queens.” Nero argues that Miss Roj’s character signifies on Ellison’s protagonist in order to confront bougie Blacks, similar to how Ellison aimed to confront Whites. “As white Americans must have been puzzled, outraged, and even guilt-stricken after reading Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,

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so too is the effect Miss Roj has had on the assimilated blacks Wolfe chose to confront (313).”

Miss Roj’s over the top persona and commentary flips expectations about Blackness, gender, and agency. Nero continues the comparison by pointing out that while Ellison’s protagonist almost kills a man for calling him a nigga in contrast to Wolfe’s Miss Roj who signifies on a homophobic assailant by literally snapping. In both situations, the situation was essentially handled. However, Wolfe’s Miss Roj riffs/signifies off of and speaks back to dominant expectations and misunderstandings of who she is in order to tell her story and bring larger issues to the forefront.

Throughout this dissertation, I use phrases such as “literacy normativity” and “refashioning,” drawing on Eric Pritchard’s various works, to discuss how Black LGBTQ signify and play on static notions of literacy, discourse, appearance, and space to survive. In *Fashioning Lives*, Pritchard examines how traditional understandings of literacy are often used to inflict harm and oppress Black queer people. In his book, Pritchard uses the phrase “literacy normativity” to explain the West’s influence on how we commonly understand literacy in very specific ways that often limit our understanding of marginalized groups:

> It is a widely held opinion that the cultural, social, political, and economic capital of literacy in the Western world is what gives literacy its authoritativeness. I propose that literacy normativities are, as with the others, using this authoritativeness to try and cement the marginality of particular individuals and groups. (30)

For example, many of Pritchard’s interviewees point to religious texts as proof that their gender or sexual identities were irreconcilable with their spirituality. He goes on to explain restorative literacies as a way Black LGBTQ people respond to various forms of literacy normativity. He
writes that Black LGBTQ people respond by repurposing literacy to survive. He sees restorative literacies as tactical cultural labor. He explains that restorative literacies are counter acts of literacy normativity through the application of literacies of self- and communal love manifested in a myriad of ways across a number of sites and contexts toward the ends of making a life on one’s own terms. (33)

In this way, restorative literacies and signifying connect with fierce literacies. Signifying gets at the play, the creative use of language among Black people across history, a passed down tradition. Pritchard shows us how these practices occur in the lives of Black LGBTQ people, and more important for this project, he shows the specific ways that Black LGBTQ counter and complicate problematic readings of who they are.

In an earlier article, Pritchard discusses Louisiana transgender activist Ella Mosley and how she refashions literacy through identity formation as an individual act of resistance and survival. He discusses rereading and rewriting as deliberate misuses of literacy and forms of resistance, what he would later call “restorative literacies”:

This includes picking apart the values, assumptions, ideologies that underpin the misuse itself, as well as one’s own privileges, power, and powerlessness in relation to it. It represents the act of invention and/or reinvention of texts, ideologies, histories, etc. that develop in the liminal space left by confronting the misuses and the act of rereading. (“This is Not” 283)

I argue that this strategy of rereading and refashioning are deliberate and essential to Black and queer people’s survival in the world. This type of literacy is also at play when Black queer people read, throw shade, and pull trade. When my participants perform these literacy acts and discuss them, they see themselves as part of a larger community and history of meaning making.
I argue that they use reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade as resistance to misuses or static ideas about race, gender, and class. Specific to the field of composition and rhetoric, my participants help me to understand literacy as ever changing—inform by static ideas but not inherently bound by them. As many of my participants demonstrate throughout this project, Black queer people often have had to reimagine or, to paraphrase Black feminist lesbian mother poet Audre Lorde, define themselves for themselves in order to survive.

In particular, Pritchard engages with a rhetoric of necessary awareness of one’s discourse community for survival in his examination of Mosley’s rhetorical practices (see “This is Not”). Mosley is a 56-year-old black transgender woman activist living in the South. She utilizes a type of subversion similar to shade in order to survive and function as an activist. Pritchard discusses how the material life of Mosley creates an occasion for social action, identity formation, and affirmation. He argues that Mosley’s rhetorical strategies are informed by her literacies of southern culture and anti-transgender rhetorics and policies in her city “Soulopoliz” and throughout the United States.

Pritchard’s examination of Mosley’s literacy as a lens on everyday sites of Black queer resistance and self-making creates a space for a similar engagement with how fierce literacies function in the lives of Black queer people. Pritchard discusses Ella Mosley’s literacy practices existing within a multiplicity of identities (282). He uses the notion of “multiplicity of identities,” which comes out of Black Feminist work with intersectionality. He cites “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective, which he states “described identities and oppressions as being on different paths that sometimes intersect and overlap, and at other times seem as though they are experienced, synthesized or blended” (282). This synthesis of identities is where the remaking and refashioning of meaning takes place. To understand reading,
throwing shade, pullin’ trade and even signifying more generally, we need to come to terms with how one’s multiple identities intersect and inform one’s movement through the world. For me, as a Black queer scholar, I approach this research through an intersectional feminist and queer lens, which helps make visible literacy practices that run counter to and sometimes subvert dominant scripts.

Pritchard writes that Mosley’s refashioning of identity and self-making as a form of resistance started as a child. Mosley was read as a boy but would go home and “live her truth” with a feminine gender identity. She essentially refashions a feminine identity in resistance. Mosley and her family had no concept of what it meant to be transgender. As a child, Mosley saw herself and was treated by her family as an effeminate gay boy. Just because Mosely and her family did not know the term “transgender,” which was not available at the time, does not mean that Mosley did not live a transgender life, nor did it keep her from expressing herself in such a way. Pritchard writes, “she explained that she did not feel that not knowing or using the word transgender kept her from expressing herself or would have made a big difference in the degree to which her family accepted her” (284). In this way, Mosley’s gender performance is not easily defined by a heteronormative gender system but Mosley’s gender performance, like shade, was read, reread and misread, depending upon the context and the viewer. As a Black transgender woman, Mosley is confronting static and problematic literacies of gender in Soulopoliz. Many cisgender Black people are also often faced with similar problematic and seemingly commonsensical misunderstandings of race.

Most important, Pritchard reminds us how labels attempt to confine and constrict identities and possibilities. When actors push back against such labels, they are often engaging with what I call fierce literacies. By this, I do not mean simply resistance to such labels. Instead,
what is most critical is how individuals live their lives in spite of and in conversation with what Pritchard calls literacy normativity. It is such acts of living, often represented through stories, that we see fierce literacies in action. To give an example from our field, I turn to the case of Collin Craig and Staci Perryman-Clark to show how Black people and people of color, especially in the academy, are caught at the intersections of what is often too narrowly perceived as Black and white or Black and academic spaces.

Craig and Perryman-Clark encourage the field to engage with the ways race and gender impact the work that WPAs do and how multiple identities construct an identity politic. They also bring their bodies to the table as sites of knowledge. With their analysis foregrounded in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s discussion of intersectionality, Craig and Perryman-Clark use their experiences as WPAs to discuss how historically disenfranchised bodies are mis/read in the field. The scholars illustrate how they have been misread and politicize their bodies as WPAs by writing about their experiences in the journal *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, an act in itself that constitute a fierce literacy:

In other words, we fully embody the identity of writing program administrators while living in bodies that have historically signified as contested sites of meaning. By situating our narratives in critical race theory, we politicize black bodies and black intersecting identities as sites that challenge the status quo of representation in writing program administration and within the academy at large.

(39)

The phrase “historically signified as contested sites of meaning” is especially important because it speaks to the institutionalized misreading of Black people and their bodies as inferior for simply being Black that has existed in this country and around the world since the Middle
Passage. One of the examples Craig and Perryman-Clark cite when discussing misreading of their bodies is an experience Craig has upon first starting his job as a WPA. He writes that his department chair would often call on him to do manual labor around the office presumably because of his race and athletic build. Craig writes:

Besides the initial frustration of feeling exploited as a graduate student, the request to use my “strong muscles” to help move office furniture undermined my subject position as a black intellectual. In these moments of interpellation, I was asked to signify as another type of laborer in this working space. (47)

He goes on to say that this misreading fit with a larger historical narrative of the “big black guy as furniture mover” despite his identity as a WPA research assistant. Craig’s account is part of a larger script about the Black male body that understands it only in terms of manual labor. Even though he was a WPA research assistant, this larger script of what his body represents eclipses his professional identity—at least, as he sees it, from the perspective of his department Chair.

Perryman-Clark discusses an experience where her body is misread as well. She writes about a time where a professor in her department suggested that she help one of his Black male TAs because, “He might take constructive criticism better from a pretty woman like you than an old white guy like me.” In this example and the prior one, there are familiar misreadings of Black bodies that reductively position them as manual laborers and sexual objects. In these examples, we see Craig and Perryman-Clark’s identities being misread or at least made secondary to larger ideas of what their bodies have historically meant or how they functioned. These scholars use the academic journal as a space to critically read and correct perceptions of Black people in academic spaces.

On a discursive level, throwing shade and reading become ways to combat and correct
such views. In the academy, the method may be to write an article or a book. That Craig and Perryman-Clark chose to read the field is an example of a fierce literacy in the sense that they rewrite dominant scripts of who they are and how their bodies should function. On a larger scale, since 2012, the Black Lives Matter movements around the country have regularly taken to the street to protest the problematic way police misread Black people, leading to the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and Mike Brown, all unarmed, at the hands of law enforcement. Black Lives Matter offers a critical read of white supremacy, which understands Black bodies as being inherently dangerous.

Similar to Craig and Perryman-Clark’s experiences being Black and misread in the academy, Kirkland discusses a similar problematic misreading of young Black men in the field of literacy studies. He writes, “The field of literacy studies, as I have understood it, has been quiet about the ways in which Black males practice literacy, opting instead for a discourse that plays on labels and lacks, constructing Black males in troubling and, to me, inaccurate ways” (9). Kirkland challenges the field to look beyond these problematic readings by telling the stories of a group of young Black men in their worlds. He rightly points out that “experience informs and affirms and is informed by and constitutes everyday literate behavior” (9). We cannot understand literacy unless we “[fold] together the doing and the being, the struggle and the sacrifice—unless the story of literacy becomes the story of us, the literate (9). Like Kirkland, I am attempting to complicate the field’s understanding of literacy. By using reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade as entry points, I am examining how Black LGBTQ people read, reread, misread, make, remake discourse, performance, and space for survival. I would argue that speaking back to and often rewriting oneself back into the world are central to my discussion of fierce literacies.

In this section, I have engaged with some of the ways Black and/or queer people have
refashioned static notions of literacy through signifying and through explication in academic writing, confronting dominant and persistent misreadings about who they are. I have done this to provide a basis or impetus for Black and, or queer literacies to be understood as in-flux and ever changing and in conversation with very static, problematic ideas of Blackness. By examining fierce literacies, I attempt to tell a richer and more complex story about the people who practice them and where they actually take place. In my next section, I use throwing shade as an entry point to discuss the ways that I am continuing a larger discussion of refashioning literacy, performance, and multiple readings.

*Shade: Performing Black Masculinity Queered*

Here, I critically engage with scholarship in composition, performance, and masculinity studies in order to examine the complicated ways Black and/or queer people’s bodies perform in conversation with the larger normative (read: white supremacist) culture. The scholarship in this section speaks to the ways gender and class are read, performed, and reimagined as a strategy of survival in Black queer spaces as well as the larger culture. Many of the scholars presented here confront static ideas of masculinity and sexuality in conversation with Blackness. This section will also demonstrate how performances of class and gender inform how Black and/or queer people see themselves and each other. The scholarship in this section provides a lens to understand what is at stake in the gender and class performances of Black queer people through the texts and participants I study.

Throwing shade is a clear example of refashioning of literacy that takes place in the literate practice of signifying. In order to decipher shade, one must not only read literally but re-read statements and contexts for shade or subversive intent. In order to throw shade, one must
layer seemingly innocuous statements with gestures or facial expressions in order for a statement
to signify multiple meanings or readings. “Throwing shade,” the practice itself, is an example of
signifying, while reading is the larger literate practice of deciphering and meaning making of
shaded statements. The use of the term *reading*, said with special emphasis, to refer to a Black queer critical reading is another example of how this refashioning functions. Most people think
of reading as decoding words in a sentence to derive meaning or understanding. Reading and
throwing shade are considered to be a discursive art in Black queer communities, the art of
insult. Reads and shade are often over-the-top performances, which utilize wit and charisma,
designed to entertain, build camaraderie, and subversively insult. A read is the recitation and
performance of an insult that demonstrates keen perception, wit, and charisma.

Shade is a subversive insult or the suggestion of an insult. Harlem Ballroom performer
Dorian Corey famously says in the film *Paris Burning*, “Shade comes from reading. Reading
came first,” which speaks to shade as the subversive form of reading. Shade is not simply a
deliberate misreading of a phrase. Shade is meant to be read multiple ways (insult, compliment,
innocuous comment) by multiple audiences. These discursive performances often take place
amongst friends and family, who can read the multiple meanings because of their relationship to
the speaker. Shade works as a form of signification by playing off of common readings of
situations and motifs. The need to both create and discern salient and subversive content speaks
to a larger need for minorities to communicate with multiple audiences in a multilingual world,
where their language and behavior are regularly policed.

Specifically, the fear of being mistreated because of one’s race or sexual orientation
forces many Black queer people to think critically about and often refashion how they present
their language and appearance, as well as the spaces they occupy. In Anna Holmes’ 2015 *New
York Times article “The Underground Art of Insult,” performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson argues that the practice of throwing shade is informed by the violence faced by Black LGBTQ people in this country. He states:

The threat of being beaten or mutilated was always there if you were to look at a slave master directly in his eye, or if you were to sass, so African-Americans developed these covert ways of communication, which, over time, have morphed into the traditional ways that they interact with one another. (qtd. in Holmes)

I agree with Johnson and see the refashioning that Black people do with language as a part of a larger literacy of survival that I call fierce. This literacy of survival is informed by the material lives of Black women and queer people who must have a rhetorical toolbox to refashion language in multiple ways in order to survive in a patriarchal society.

Geneva Smitherman discusses signifying as a performance within a larger examination of the history and contemporary discourses about African American language. In Word from the Mother, Smitherman discusses signifying as a style of verbal play that provides playful commentary or serious social critique. She states, “In fact, a common strategy is to first boldly state your critique and then retreat to the familiar Black expression: ‘I was jes playin’” (69). This is how throwing shade regularly gets people’s asses whipped. The dozens as a rhetorical practice is guilty of the same thing. Shade is a performance of signifying and is essentially one of the tools of the Yuruba trickster Orisha Esu-Elegbara who sits telling coded riddles at the crossroads of God and man. It allows the rhetor to play with perception and meaning. Black LGBTQ people, both individually and collectively, embody multiple identities, meanings, and perspectives. The on-the-spot meaning making, informed by context and audience, that takes
place while reading or throwing shade is a discursive example of the refashioning that takes place in fierce literacies.

I see performances of reading and throwing shade as gay siblings to the dozens. The intentional polysemous readings, rereading, and mis-reading one does while reading, throwing and deciphering shade reminds me of Gates discussion of the Yoruba practice of reading the Ifa, which is “the richly lyrical and densely metaphorical system of sacred interpretation that the Yoruba in Nigeria have consulted for centuries…” (9). The Signatures of Odu act as visual signs that the babalawo or priest translates by reading the verse the signature signifies. Gates goes on to write that the meanings of the scriptures are metaphorical and ambiguous. Again, shade, as opposed to a read, is designed to be ambiguous and subversive. To be clear, the nature of shade is intentionally written or composed to be read multiple ways by multiple audiences. Even when shade is obvious, it becomes difficult to discuss outside of its context. This is because if the listener was not present, they missed the speaker’s nonverbal behavior and the larger context, which contain essential information for the deciphering of shade. For this reason, many participants often told narratives to set the scene; video recording the interviews allowed me and other audiences to (re)engage with these narratives and to see the embodied way that shade functions.

Performance, I maintain, is essential to a conversation about shade because it is often how the speaker says what they say that signifies that they are throwing shade. For example, “nice shoes” can be read as a compliment, insult, and/or a come-on depending on how the speaker articulates or performs the phrase. My examination of shade also continues the conversation about how Black and queer bodies perform and are read and speak back to dominant misreadings of who they are as a kind of literacy.
Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye argue for the examination of “real world writing” and that engaging with performance studies provides insight into literacy and with this, I would say insight into literacy as a performance:

As a result, we believe that performance studies, a field that emerged formally in the 1950s, has much to contribute to composition studies, a field with a parallel history and a host of similar concerns, including relationships between language and the body, individuals and communities, and social norms and forms of resistance. Perhaps most important, performance studies offers useful ways of theorizing the oftentimes slippery idea of “performing,” which is both medium and act, noun and verb. (227)

Engagement with performance demonstrates the ways Black LGBTQ people refashion static notions of literacy as learned in various institutions like school and church to how it is practiced, performed, and refashioned. Reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade can be understood as performances of fierce literacies. Performance is a useful term in this discussion of shade for two reasons. First, it is the performance that creates the context, that carries the text, variously defined. Too often understandings of literacy are conveyed without attending to the performance or the context, which is problematic. Black LGBTQ people’s literate performances remix static notions of language, appearance, and space to survive. This dissertation’s use of narrative works to make these performances visible. They show how reading, throwing shade, and pullin’ trade are both literacies of survival as well as playful expressions.

While my study focuses on people who understand themselves as Black, gay and/or queer, many works have critically engaged with the multiple ways men of color who trouble gender/sexual boundaries perform, read and are read by others (see, for example, Pritchard,
Ferguson, Johnson, Neal, McCune, King, Boykin, Jackson, and Young). Within the fields of literacy studies and rhetoric and composition, Kirkland and Vershawn Young engage with how Black men’s sexual performances are misread and what is at stake. A common theme in both of their works is that Black men have a unique relationship with racial and gender oppression that constrains their behavior in and out of academic spaces. When Kirkland’s discusses Sheldon and when Young discusses himself and President Barack Obama, they demonstrate how failure to perform as a stereotypical masculine Black man often results in the man being read as gay.

As noted, Kirkland continues a discussion of the ways young Black men are misread by the larger culture and in composition classrooms. In a chapter about masculinity, Kirkland focuses on Sheldon, a young man who is treated differently by the other males, presumably because he does not perform Black masculinity in the same way that the other boys perform it. Kirkland opens the chapter with the other guys talking about how Sheldon was different. “Some of the young men thought Sheldon was ‘sweet’ because he like to read. ‘Nobody like to read that much,’ Keith joked. ‘Girls do,’ Tony said” (108). Kirkland continues by discussing how Sheldon himself often felt like he was not living up to or being read as masculine in relation to the other young men. Kirkland writes:

Sheldon was another kind of masculine, the kind that gripped books less than firmly with epicene hands. His version of manhood searched through listening letters with effete eyes, He sometimes dangled the length of each letter of his well endowed vocabulary with liberties as gracious as the stroked of Eros (the Greek God of desire) against the ripening back of Silenus (a Greek god of drunkenness) in the gardens. (109)
This homoerotic description of Sheldon is illustrative of the ways that bodies perform and are read. This is drastically different from the athletic ethos Craig uses to describe himself. For example, Kirkland uses epicene, which I had to look up, to suggest that Sheldon’s hands perform gender neutral rather than stereotypically masculine. Other words like *gripped, dangled, well endowed, stroked,* and *ripening back* speak more to me about how Sheldon’s body is read rather than how it performs. Kirkland literally compares Sheldon’s vocabulary and performance to two Greek gods having sex. Once you get past the audacity of the comparison, it becomes a clear example of a young Black man’s literacy as “another type of masculine,” one that queers static notions of Black masculine performance. In my mind, the over the top description paints the picture of Sheldon’s performance to be somewhat queer and grandiose as well.

The potential to be misread is important to point out because it is inherent in all communicative experiences. Even straight people have to work hard to be read as straight and not gay. In *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity,* Vershawn Ashanti Young engages with how race and gender and race and sexuality intersect and inform the literacy practices of Black males. He describes his not performing as “ghetto” as contributing to his being read as gay in an Iowa barbershop. This reaction to a dominant script about Black masculinity troubles Young:

> I recognize the problem, and I’m working so that it doesn’t consume me. “Hell,” I say to myself, “I’m an English professor; that justifies reading a novel in a barbershop. And what’s this nonsense of trying to fit in, to avoid alienation, to avoid name-calling” “Sissy!” “Faggot!” (XV)

Many scholars have studied the barbershop’s role in Black community as a safe space for political and public discourse (for example, Nunley; Harris-Perry). In the 2002
movie *Barbershop*, Cedric the Entertainer’s character Eddie refers to it as “the black man’s country club.” However, as Young’s quote illustrates, for many Black men, it is a complicated site where static notions of Black masculinity are often perpetuated and policed.

I can remember many occasions growing up where I felt uncomfortable in the barbershop and tried to be cognizant of the way I walked, talked, and sat for fear of being outed as gay or just different. In Young’s excerpt, the book he carries into the barbershop serves as a queer signifier, which Young attempts to de-queer by citing his status as an English professor. I do not necessarily buy the idea that simply reading a book in a barbershop is a tell sign that a man is not heterosexual or masculine. Young’s justification for his possession of a book or another brother’s decision to wear his skinniest jeans to the barbershop because he knows trade will be there are in conversation with larger cultural and sexual literacies of the space and how one’s body is often read. Most important, Young helps us understand that the barbershop can be a space where men are confronting static constructions of Black masculinity.

What I have seen played out, time and time again, is straight Black men, who are outwardly homophobic, talk shit about men who present as feminine in the barbershop. This creates an unsafe space and leads to different conscious performances. I have also seen effeminate gay men like me walk into a barbershop, be themselves, take up space, and treat the spaces as if it was their court and enjoy the scene. Part of the fear of being Black and queer in this world is that you never know what people are thinking or what prejudices people may have.

Young continues his discussion on how queerness is read on Black men in his article “Straight Black Queer: Obama, Code-Switching, and Gender Anxiety of African American Men.” In this article, Young engages with criticisms of President Obama’s discourse in a “slew of white run media outlets” including the *Globe* and the *Washington Post*. He states that they
amplify Obama’s “nonnormative masculine traits.” Young argues that this assigns him a “deceitful, nonheteronormative sexuality” (464). Put another way, Young challenges dominant scripts of Black masculinity in which Obama is read as queer.

These scripts are further explored when Young considers code switching in the classroom. In his 2007 book, he writes: “I argue that code-switching contributes to the subordinated gender status of African American men and leads to the negative, antimasculine queering of them, whether they are straight or gay” (129). In other words, Young is suggesting that when schools tell Black men that they have to switch to Standard Academic English, they are stripping them of their home language and by extension, their masculinity.

I do not read speaking Standard Academic English as inherently a gay signifier. It is important to note that Obama gets read the way he does because of literacy normativity. Still, Young’s queer reading of Obama does speak to larger misreadings of Black men:

African American men are caught in a double-bind: they are required to become one stereotype, docile and unmasculine in order to escape another, dangerous and menacing. If Obama behaved in a more traditionally masculine way, another columnist would be writing about him as a dangerous Black man. (468)

While I am aware of the dilemma that Young is referring to and even the pressure to be traditionally masculine, his stereotypical or traditional reading of masculinity needs to be complicated. He presents a false dichotomy between the docile stereotype and the dangerous stereotype that erases any potential for multiple or alternative readings. This erases all the straight (read as straight) Black men who occupy professional spaces, use standard academic English, and occupy the gray area between the stereotypes Young presents. However, this limited masculinity and the erasure of Black professional men is read as commonsense
knowledge by many people. It also erases all the Black queer politicians who navigate this gray area.

Fierce literacies exist in the gray area in the false dichotomy that Young presents. The practice of throwing shade or subversively insulting/getting ones point across could be read as both docile and dangerous. Similarly, Black queer people are often stereotypically read as both docile and dangerous. Understanding literate practices through static notions of gender erases whole perspectives and limits engagement with the practices of marginalized groups. Black queer culture and the Ballroom scene provide more nuanced understanding of gender.

The types of readings of self and sexuality that Young discusses in Not Your Average Nigga are situated by context and often necessary for survival especially for Black queer people. The social stigma of a queer identity is part of why many people choose to keep their sexual behaviors private. When I am talking about survival, I am talking about all the tactics one must employ, whether one is a CEO or prison inmate, to ensure one’s livelihood and safety. Survival for one person may be hiding her orientation from her boss, while survival for another may be actually physically protecting his body from attack.

Fierce Pullin’ Trade

One of the questions I get the most from straight people is “How do you guys meet up?” referring to how I pull men. “How do you know they are gay?” is another one. While some may not have the tools to understand how homophobia works or how it informs the romantic and sexual relationships of queer people, I find that most people are able see that it may pose a hindrance to meeting partners. Static ideas of spaces as either straight or gay are examples of what Pritchard calls “literacy normativity,” which block us from seeing how Black LGBTQ
people complicate these spaces. These static notions of space also lead us to read the people in these spaces as homogeneous and, in turn, erase identities that complicate the space. In this section, I critically engage with scholarship in composition, performance, and sexuality studies in order to examine the complicated ways Black and/or queer bodies are read and performed in relationship to space. Specifically, the scholarship in this section speaks to the ways context and spaces inform how Black queer people understand their identity. I also demonstrate how setting often informs how Black and/or queer people perform and understand their sexual identities.

“Pullin’ Trade” is a phrase among Black gay men that means attracting straight men. Trade are men who are curious about or engage in homosexual sex but do not necessarily identify as gay. I understand pullin’ trade as a fierce literacy because it reimagines static notions of literacy in regard to space (white, Black, gay, straight spaces all in flux). Pullin’ trade often take place in spaces that are not designed for gay people. For example, I have pulled trade everywhere: in the library and on the street. The fact that pullin’ trade often takes place in plain sight of straight people, without them knowing, speaks to how homophobia has constrained the behaviors of many sexually queer people but has not eradicated them.

In recognizing pullin’ trade as fierce literacy, I hope to extend conversations about literacy and performance studies that disrupt static notions of space as it pertains to literacy. Specifically, Kirkland and Jeffrey McCune move us to think through how our understanding of space is complicated by the bodies that exist in the space. These works also help me to understand space and identity as constantly in flux—the process of making and remaking, fashioning and refashioning, performing and re-performing.

Kirkland, for example, does not just stay in school to understand the Black men in his study. He hangs with them in a variety of contexts in order to engage with their literacy
practices. By studying the students outside of school, Kirkland attempts to get to know them better and in doing so complicates the idea of literacy and language acquisition being merely an academic endeavor. In particular, Kirkland’s engagement with the young men in their home spaces, encourages the field to think through how we read Black men and their engagement with space. He describes the “multiple worlds” that young Black men inhabit:

The high school, one such world, was a complex nexus of many settings, including two English classrooms, hallway lockers, and a lunchroom. The neighborhood, another world, was also a complex site of systematic inquiry. It, too, was composed of multiple settings: homes and workplaces and various venues in which the young men and I periodically met. (8)

Kirkland describes participants and their family members as well as other people outside of school. He recognizes that these factors are key to understanding the young men’s construction of literacy and life. He critiques the academy’s tendency of seeing academic and home spaces as diametrically opposed: “Transiting their multiple worlds, I realized that the arbitrary binary that many researchers set up between the school and the home seemed contrived and limiting” (8). But there is not an isolated context to study young Black men’s literacy because literacy itself is not static; rather, it is developed and redeveloped in different contexts. The young men in his study had “literacies [that] were hybrid and dialogic in nature, constitutive of the situations of the multiple spaces they traversed in our time together” (8). By understanding literacy in this way, Kirkland shows how identity is always being reconstituted by the space.

Consider, once again, Kirkland’s representation of Sheldon. It is impossible to understand Sheldon apart from the space in which he lives. Rather than conforming to those around him, Sheldon offers a portrait of masculinity that resists an easy classification of Black men: “His
mirror of manhood was split between the imagined Apollonian masculinity perched against the
ghetto, thuggish mannishness of Baccus” (109). Similar to Young, Kirkland juxtaposes two
identities: a queer reading of the Ancient Greeks and a contemporary image of an urban Black
male in order to suggest that Sheldon’s performance of masculinity was caught at the
intersection, leading him to ask: “Since manhood models to which he was pressured to conform
weren’t among either of these images, then, who was he, and who was he supposed to be?”
(109). One answer is an effeminate Black man or simply as Sheldon’s mother put it, “he a little
different, but he just as much man as anybody” (113).

It is clear that Kirkland reads the group of young men he works with as heterosexual. Still, there is an implicit conversation about sexuality that runs through much of the book.
Kirkland mentions the young men’s discussions of getting girls, but does not engage with a
sexually queer identity as a possibility. Sheldon as a smart, Black, and femme man upsets our
idea of Black boys and their literacy as silent, heterosexual, and masculine. Imagine, for a
moment, that Sheldon is queer. Can we still claim this space as a straight space? My point is that
we need to read beyond static notions of space. If we can read Sheldon as potentially gay or
queer, it hastens us to label all places, where we do not “see” gay people, as straight spaces.

In Jeffrey McCune’s *Sexual Discretion*, he discusses gender performance in Chicago gay
clubs and complicates our ideas of what performances are expected in this context and space. He
shows us that gay spaces are not always inclusive spaces. For example, he shows how gay nights
at straight clubs often have higher door prices:

As we approached the cashier, we read a sign announcing, “ALTERNATIVE
LIFESTYLES NIGHT,” which explained why there was a ten dollar cover
charge. We both looked at each other, astonished at the use of the terms
“alternative” and “lifestyle,” which clearly marked the space as not only queer, but temporarily non-heterosexual. (76)

Similar to McCune’s discussion, I have had similar negative experiences at gay clubs. In Syracuse, I have visited white gay clubs like Trexx and Rain with my other Black queer friends. We often encounter heavy surveillance by club security and other patrons. Urban, Hip-Hop and/or Black music requests are often met with hostility. Other patrons can often be rude, too. This is not every single time I go out, but it is common. My point here is that gay spaces are not always inclusive spaces. They are often racist, and even Black queer spaces can be ripe with transphobia, misogyny, and classism.

McCune goes on to discuss a very common dichotomy that takes place in many Black queer identified spaces. Musically, aesthetically, and spatially, there is a separation between hip-hop and house music, as well as thug and diva performances (77–78). Specific to this project, McCune describes how men perform sexual identity to procure sexual behavior in a specific context. He discusses Shawn as one of three men:

As I step down from the passageway onto the dance floor, to my surprise I see Shawn. This twenty-two-year-old college student classifies himself as being on the DL and previously vowed that he would never “be caught dead in one of those sissy clubs.” (85)

Shawn performs a disavowal of what he perceives as gay culture, yet he made arrangements to be there like everyone else. He is McCune writes: “It was with even greater surprise that Shawn acknowledged me and proceeds to take my hand and place it on his groin” (85). Reluctance with being identified as a sissy is a theme that runs through many of the works about Black men and masculinity that I have included in this chapter.
Shawn’s presence on “alternative lifestyle night” and his behavior towards McCune on one level signifies a queer sexual performance, but it does not inherently signify a queer sexual identity. According to McCune, Shawn admits that he and his friends oftentimes wear fitted baseball caps to the club. This is to both conceal their identities and to bolster a hip-hop thug ethos. McCune writes:

Shawn was astutely aware of the value of clothes in the regulation and monitoring of what is properly masculine. In a sense, Shawn and his friends’ clothing are the material masks for their queer desire. On one hand, his hat is a signifier of Hip-Hop, while, on the other hand, it is also a sign of Shawn’s desire to both not see as well be seen. All at once, hip-hop is the corroborator and the concealer of queer desire. (86)

Shawn’s gender performance enacts a perceived contradiction that is common across spaces, both those that are perceived as gay and those that are not. For Shawn, “alternative lifestyles” night is not inherently a safe or liberated space, but it is a place where he can perform a particular masculine identity to attract the gay eye for gay sex. By taking on a trade identity, he is able to openly pursue homosexual sex while circumventing any stigma associated with a gay identity. It is in this club that he can perform gay sexual behavior, while a queer gender performance is still policed. In this example, the fact that it is “alternative lifestyles night” informs the attendee’s attraction to the space, and even their behavior in it. Yet, it does not dictate how they choose to identify themselves. In the case of Shawn, it is clear how some men often refashion their own understandings of identity and space in conversation with the dominant narrative about what their bodies, discourse, and performance say and mean.
I have to admit that it has been a challenge writing this first chapter for reasons that I feel are very relevant to my engagement with literacy. One theme that has been salient to me is a fear and disavowal of the Black sissy. I self-identify as a Black gay male, femme, queen, bottom and all around bad bitch. I embrace both the masculine and feminine aspects of my personality and was regularly disciplined for the later.

Often, scholars fixate on how tragic it is for a Black man to be read as gay but not the tragedy of homophobia. The conversation stops at masculinity and does not critically engage with the various ways Black queer people perform gender and sexual identities. I am over texts about Black men and Black people working to be straight and white. Inspired by Pritchard’s engagement with Ella Mosely, and Kirkland’s discussion of Sheldon, I want to focus on the ways Black, femme, and queer people refashion and make interventions to survive, love, and liberate themselves. My examination of performers in the film *Paris is Burning* and their advice to younger queens speak to these interventions, which I take up in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

“How to Survive in Gay World”: The Literacy Narratives of *Paris is Burning*

And, to a certain extent, the person I am now wouldn’t really exist if I hadn’t started listening to people like Octavia St. Laurent and Marlon Riggs almost as mentors. Not only did I find strength in what they were doing and their words and energy, but I fell in love with the actual aesthetic of it all too—this frozen thing that maybe doesn’t fully exist anymore felt like the home where I needed to be.

—Dev Hynes (Blood Orange), *Pitchfork*

In January 2015, I attended a screening of the documentary *Paris is Burning* hosted by photographer and friend Gerard Gaskins at ArtRage, an art gallery in Syracuse, New York. I had seen the film dozens of times before this screening, but Gaskins was hosting, and I figured Syracuse only had so many events catered towards Black queer people—so, I might as well go. I decided to put on some black eyeliner, skinny jeans, and my rabbit black fur jacket. I was giving entirely too much, but if you can’t be gay at gay shit, where can you be gay? I walked into the event and was greeted by a room full of old white people.

This was no time to be shy. I looked around for a minute and found Gaskins, which was not hard because he was the only other brotha in the room. His eyes grew big as he looked me up and down and complimented me on my look. After rapping for a minute, I continued to look at the photos on display, which were a mixture of ones from Gaskin’s book *Legendary* and the photo exhibition “Trans*cending Gender.” A couple more people of color arrived. I found my seat next to a Black woman and Latin man, who had already started kiki-ing. Soon Gaskins
started the screening. For the first time, I became aware of myself watching this film that my friends and I quote lines from daily. Instead of enjoying the movie, I was reading the mostly white crowd and trying to figure out how they were reading this film that I held so intimately.

Throughout the movie, the two friends sitting next to me screamed “Yes, Bitch!” “Yasssss Mama!,” especially when Octavia St. Laurent came across the screen. It was their emotional response to St. Laurent’s hopes for the future that left the biggest impression on me. As St. Laurent talks about wanting to travel the world, have many men, and be a household name, the two cry and say “You did it, Mama! You did it!” I later found out that these were two of St. Laurent’s gay children.

After the film was over, Gaskins fielded questions about the film and ballroom culture. He discussed the ways ballroom culture still exists today around the world in various outlets. He was then asked about the ballroom children themselves. Since 1990, the majority of the documentary participants had died, and the film itself ends with the murder of Venus Xtravaganza. Gaskins informed the audience of several ballroom performers who went on to live happy lives and earn doctorates. He told us that he did not want to give the impression that every story in the ballroom scene is tragic. He wanted us to know that some ballroom performers were flourishing. Then the woman next to me interjected, “We must remember that they survived. We survived.” Gaskins cosigned St. Laurent’s daughter’s comments. She wanted us to remember that even the ones who never made it out of Harlem or earned a degree had survived. I see *Paris is Burning* as a story of survival.

What I found most compelling in the film was the performers precise commentary on how gender and class were socially constructed in this country. While acknowledging gender and class as real social constructs, their personal narratives about the ballroom scene and related
topics demonstrated various ways Black queer people have historically reimagined and refashioned these constructs to survive. In this chapter, I rhetorically engage with *Paris is Burning* as a text. Specifically, I will engage with key scenes that illustrate the various ways the film refashions static notions of gender and class in order to survive in a larger white supremacist society. I draw on insights from participants that Jennie Livingston interviewed, several members of the ballroom scene, about various topics including language, family, beauty, future, and class. As a viewer and member of the larger Black gay community, it is clear to me that the participants were trying to pass on know-how and a history to the next generation, through their telling of narratives. Throughout the film, the ballroom performers pass on clear rules of survival in dialogue along with a critique of a racist and unequal class system. These rules are a type of literacy that participants needed to survive. In this way, I see Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* as a literacy narrative of the golden era of the Harlem ballroom scene. I argue that the *Paris* performers act as Black queer ancestors who leave fierce literacy mandates of survival through their narratives in the film. I begin by discussing the movie and its importance to Black queer and Queen culture. Then I will tease out the fierce literacies expressed along with the other literacy narratives that help me engage with the participants as ancestors.

*Paris is Burning and Black Queer Representation: The Film and its Reception*

*Paris is Burning* is a canonical text in the Black queer community, along with Marlon Rigg’s *Tongues Untied*, in that it is one of the first full-length movie depictions of Black queer people in Black and/or Black queer contexts (Johnson). It is the first documentary to capture the New York ballroom scene during its “Golden Era.” I wish I remembered the first time I saw *Paris is Burning*, but I do not. It seems like it has always been playing in the back of my mind like *Noah’s Arc* episodes or E. Lynn Harris’s books. My friends and I often make references to *Paris
in our day-to-day conversations and often discuss feeling connected to or advised by the participants. We often evoke their larger than life fierce personas as tools for survival.

During the opening scenes of *Paris*, a voiceover discusses balls as communal gatherings of Black queer people. He talks about balls as a place where “Gay people… men…gather together under one roof and decide to have a competition amongst themselves.” A ball is an event, typically held by a house or organization, where house members compete against opposing houses in categories. Some of the categories in the film include scenes like Town & Country, Executive Realness, Schoolboy/Schoolgirl realness and High Fashion Eveningwear. In *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, Marlon M. Bailey breaks down the gender politics of the contemporary Detroit ballroom scene through performance ethnography and examines the Ballroom as a queer cultural formation. Bailey discusses how the ballroom scene also still works as a place of refuge for Black and Latino queer people: “For most, the Ballroom scene becomes a necessary refuge and a space in which to share and acquire skills that help Black and Latino/a LGBT individuals survive the urban world” (7). It is this sharing of Black queer survival skills that I feel is the enduring legacy of *Paris*.

In *Paris*, Livingston follows the lives of several gay and transsexual ballroom performers in the late 1980s. The film is most remembered and cited for its explanation of shade, which I explore in the next chapter and, to some extent, later in this chapter. It is commonly understood in Black queer communities that Harlem Drag balls and Black gay culture date back to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s (D’Emilio; Nugent and Wirth). Many in the Black queer

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4 Similar ballroom scenes exist all over the world and snippets of ballroom scenes can be found across popular culture
community point to drag performer Crystal LaBeija’s dramatic exit from the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant, a Manhattan drag contest, as the beginning of Harlem Ballroom culture. Both the contest itself and Crystal LaBeija’s dramatic exit and fierce reading of it as racist were captured in Frank Simon’s 1968 documentary *The Queen*, which Frank Ocean samples on his album *Endless*. After leaving the contest, LaBeija founded the first house of the ballroom scene, the House of LaBeija. As discussed in *Paris*, soon after, several houses were founded and began to have balls where houses would compete against rival houses. Now there are hundreds of house and ballroom places all over the world. One controversy of the film is its often-tragic portrayal of Black and Latino queer youth. The film follows the Harlem Ballroom scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s, depicting participants who break the law in order to survive and culminating with Venus Xtravaganza’s tragic murder, which is read by her House Mother Angie as a part of being transgender in New York.

In *Black Looks*, feminist writer and scholar bell hooks critiques the film’s embrace of feminine whiteness and by extension the “brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself—its way of life— as the only meaningful life there is” (hooks, 149). While briefly acknowledging its joyful moments, hooks raises important questions about how the documentary chronicles the life of black queer people:

> Any viewer of *Paris is Burning* can neither deny the way in which its contemporary drag balls have the aura of sports events, aggressive competitions, one team (in this case “house”) competing against another etc., nor ignore the way in which the male “gaze” in the audience is directed at participants in a manner akin to the objectifying phallic stare straight men direct at ‘feminine’ women daily in public spaces. *Paris is Burning* is a film that many audiences assume is
inherently oppositional because of its subject matter and the identity of the filmmaker. Yet the film’s politics of race, gender, and class are played out in ways that are both progressive and reactionary. (149)

In many respects, I agree with hooks. Performers in the film do share fantasies of living and looking like the characters from *Dynasty*, the 1980s-television show, or as popular supermodels or rich heiresses, who are unanimously white and wealthy. hooks goes on to state that the film represents a larger worshiping of white ideas of wealth and beauty that encourage the performers and many Black people to worship such ideals while living “in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die” in order to pursue these ideals (149). For these reasons, it is not surprising that both hooks and I were uncomfortable when we viewed the movie in a room surrounded by white people, many of whom were cooing over the film. The audience at ArtRage laughed at the appropriate parts and had a similar reaction to the film as the audience hooks discusses.

However, as a Black gay man, I felt territorial over the film and sensitive to their reactions. Yet I will make a case for the film’s value, but first I want to address a few more of the critiques.

Livingston has been read by some as an outsider, the stereotypical white researcher, who gains access, does her research, profits, and leaves while the community stays the same. Yet Livingston has challenged such critiques. In Jesse Green’s 1993 *New York Times* article “Paris Has Burned,” Livingston argues that claiming the film is designed for white consumption is unfounded due the film’s success with a largely gay audience that include Black and Latinos. Livingston goes on to say, “I’m white, yes, but I’m an openly queer, female director, and I can’t think of anything more out of the mainstream. I’m sorry, but I do not think I have the same relationship to the ruling class as a straight man.” Livingston points to her gender and sexuality to suggest that she, too, is oppressed by the larger patriarchal system. However, Livingston’s
whiteness and the themes of white adulation that exist in *Paris* cannot be overlooked because they play a role in how well the film has circulated and how it has been received.

While *Paris* is credited for spreading ballroom culture around the world, many of the participants complained about what they saw as unfair compensation for their participation in the film. Angie Xtravaganza, founder of the House of Xtravaganza and participant in Livingston’s film, died from HIV/AIDS in 1993, providing an exigency for Green’s engagement with *Paris*’ legacy and to declare ominously “Paris Has Burned.” One of the biggest controversies of the film is that many of the performers felt that they were exploited and unfairly compensated for their participation. Through interviews with several performers in the film, Green chronicles different responses including Corey’s, who expresses ambivalence toward many ballroom performers and their reaction to the film’s success.

Corey discusses how the community reacted to the film: “Oh yes, to this day a lot of the girls hate Miss Jennie, but that’s just greed…” As Green notes, Livingston paid $55,000 to thirteen performers who appeared in the movie; the movie cost $500,000 plus $175,000 for music clearance, and it yielded $4 million dollars. Corey points out that the movie studio was the real beneficiary. “I’ll tell you who is making out is those clever Miramaxes,” notes Corey. “But I didn't do it for money anyway: I did it for fun. Always have.”

Still, others had different views. *Paris* performer Pepper LaBeija, for example, did not see the nominal compensation as exploitative but as betrayal:

> When Jennie first came, we were at a ball, in our fantasy, and she threw papers at us. We didn’t read them, because we wanted the attention. We loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars.
But she told us that when the film came out we would be all right. There would be more coming. (Green)

In her interview, Livingston remarks that she has not gotten rich off the film either. However, she does acknowledge that her whiteness, education, and class allow her more flexibility and leverage in our society. Specifically, the success of the film gave her the ability to work as a filmmaker:

And that’s something I wasn’t before (a working filmmaker). It doesn't mean it’s easy to get money. But I am educated and I am white so I have the ability to write those grants and push my little body through whatever door I need to get it through.

Here, she recognized that many of the drag performers would not be able to make a film like this about their lives because of how society is structured. In addition, many of the performers, although receiving a nominal fee, became famous and have influenced a new generation of Black queer people. Still, the problems raised in París, most significantly the performers’ material conditions, encounters with racism and homophobia, are not so different from what many Black queer and transgender people endure today.

Many of the performers died in the decade after filming, reducing the potential impact on the lives of the participants, leaving a morbid legacy. Many of the participants, whether they knew it or not, were giving some of their last words on Black queer life for generations of Black queer people. The film’s dedication to “the legendary children” and “upcoming legends” is a nod to one of the performers comments about his status in the ballroom scene and also to the eternal nature of the literacies they pass on to the next generation. By dedicating the film to the
upcoming legends, Livingston writes the performers as ancestors for future generations of LGBTQ people.

The impact of *Paris is Burning* can be seen all over popular culture. Black reality television shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta, Braxton Family Values, Love and Hip Hop,* and *Basketball Wives* reference and implement shade in verbal battles. *Rupaul’s Drag Race* has a “Reading is Fundamental” challenge in every season where judges see who is the best at the elevated insult performance of reading. Musicians C+C Music Factory and Blood Orange have also sampled interview scenes from *Paris* in their music. Also, most of my participants from chapter three’s examination of shade reference *Paris* for their definition of shade and as an influence on their identities as Black queer people. There is a persistent theme of community tied to survival that runs through the film. In the next section, my analysis will engage with the fierce literacies of survival that *Paris* performers leave to us, their descendants.

*Inheriting Fierce: Understanding the Literacies of Paris*

In his article “Like Signposts on the Road: The Function of Literacy in Constructing Black Queer Ancestors,” Eric Pritchard engages with Black queer literacies and the ways we build and maintain relationships with Black queer ancestors, such as Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. Pritchard argues that Black queer people combat historical erasure and non-normative lifestyles by identifying, exploring, and challenging erasure. Specifically, Black queer people appropriate literacy by forming relationships with Black queer ancestors to build communities, identities, and cultural traditions (32). One of the literacy practices he discusses is life-fashioning. Pritchard explains that life-fashioning “refers to the ways in which one achieves self-care, resistance, collective empowerment, and personal affirmation” (32). This is exactly what I see happening in
Paris, making it a literacy narrative that chronicles how LGBTQ people create community across time and space. Throughout the documentary, the performers discuss the ways they refashion concepts such as family, gender, class, and beauty to create camaraderie.

I build upon Pritchard’s terms “life-fashioning,” “literacy normativity,” and “rereading/rewriting” when I discuss the fierce literacies expressed throughout the documentary. As described in chapter one, I use the term fierce literacies to engage with Black LGBTQ people’s literacy practices of refashioning for survival. I argue that the performers deconstruct and refashion static ideas of gender, race, and class to survive in an often racist, misogynist, classist, and homophobic society. I argue that they do a fierce refashioning of gender and class using discourse, performance, and space that force the audience to critically think through gender and class as social constructs. Pritchard discusses rereading/rewriting as a way to speak back to and undercut oppressive racial or sexual uses of literacy:

This includes picking apart the values, assumptions, ideologies that underpin the misuse itself, as well as one’s own privileges, power, and powerlessness in relation to it. It represents the act of invention and or reinvention of texts, ideologies, histories, etc. that develop in the liminal space left by confronting the misuses and the act of rereading. (283)

In Paris, I explore the tactics used to resist static ideas of class and binary ideas about gender that work to erase the lives, stories, and knowledges of Black trans and the larger queer community. The documentary’s circulation in the LGBTQ community is a testament to how the movie has provided viewers with a history of articulate confident Black queer people, a portrait that was absent from mainstream popular culture. In this way, the documentary illustrates a literacy performance that asks us to consider who creates knowledge and how that knowledge is
produced. The performers demonstrate how societal constructs, such as race, class, and gender, are understood by the dominant culture, while at the same time reinterpreting, outmaneuvering, and critiquing static implementations of these constructs to survive.

The participants interviewed in *Paris* serve as Black queer ancestors who leave survival literacies for future generations of Black queer youth. It is my belief that *Paris* functions as a literacy narrative in this way. As noted in chapter one, Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetaert discuss the value of literacy narratives as detailing moments of literacy acquisition as “rites of passage.” They go on to say that literacy researchers have turned to both ethnographic methods and literacy narratives in popular culture to engage with how literacy functions:

literacy researchers have increasingly turned to (popular) literacy narratives—novels, plays and films—not only to illustrate academic theories about literacy, but also for critically assessing or engaging with *myths or templates* about literacy that circulate in (popular) culture at large. (647)

I, too, look at the dominant scripts that circulate about literacy as it pertains to race, gender, and class. In *Paris*, I look at how those scripts are challenged, particularly how participants demonstrate and deconstruct Eurocentric and elitist myths or templates about gender, beauty and class.

Borrowing from Deborah Brandt’s notion of “literacy sponsors,” I contend that the participants and Livingston, thanks to documentary video as a medium, serve as literacy sponsors and by extension literacy ancestors. Brandt discusses literacy sponsors as those people we often remember and cite when we talk about how we acquired literacy. Brandt writes that literacy sponsors “lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association”
(Literacy 19). Literacy sponsors can also play a role in suppressing literacies. Livingston is a sponsor because she made the movie and brought the stories forward. Yet she is not the only sponsor: the reason the film is so beloved is because it connected a community across time and space. Black queer people have made *Paris* an iconic canonical text through their adulation and circulation of the film. By capturing this time and space on film, through the narratives shared in the movie, it formed a lasting legacy for future generations of Black queer people.

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a rhetorical analysis of key scenes from the film. I argue that Black queer people embrace the film and its participants because of its critique of oppression and its discussion of the survival in day-to-day Black queer life. While, as bell hooks notes, the movie at times privileges whiteness, it also illustrates something far more complex: the rhetorical practices or literacies that Black LGBTQ people create that go far beyond appropriation. To understand this, I first analyze how the ballroom connects with life outside the ballroom. I then look at the relationship between language and play, with particular attention to shade. Finally, I deconstruct realness and consider the role of space in shaping these identities.

*Overlapping Worlds*

To understand the ballroom in *Paris*, you need to understand what’s going on outside of it. I love the opening of *Paris*. The film opens with scenes of Black and Latino people laughing, dancing, and having a good time in the streets in 1987 New York City. There is a title shot giving the date and location, but it is easy to tell the time by the late 1980s fashion, music, and film quality. It is like being transported into a different time. However, once the male voiceover begins, it is clear that the time is not so different from the time we live in: “I remember my dad say, ‘You have three strikes against you in this world.’ ‘Every black man has two—that they’re just black and
they’re male.’ ‘But you’re black and you’re male and you’re gay.’” The speaker goes on to describe how his father says that if he plans to live his life this way, he will have to be stronger than he ever imagined. This is a queer version of the “You have to be twice as good (as your white counterparts)” Black respectability rhetoric that many Black parents tell their kids to prepare them to compete in a racist, classist, and homophobic society. My father would often suggest that there was a difference between a “sexual orientation” and a “lifestyle” and stressed that I needed to be as close to the mainstream as possible in order to survive. This desire to blend and be a part of normative society is a salient theme throughout the film even as the performers challenge dominant representations. While many of the performers relish in their identity as Black queer people, they also express ambivalence to how they are read in and outside of the scene.

As discussed earlier, Crystal LaBeija’s 1967 exit from the Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant and the founding of the House of LaBeija is often referred to as the beginning of the ballroom scene and the founding of the first house. Dorian Corey discusses houses in the ballroom scene as families and compared them to the type of families that hippies created during the 1960s. Corey states: “The hippies had families and no one thought nothing about it. It wasn’t a question of a man and a woman and children, which we grew up knowing as a family. It’s a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond.” He goes on to say that early houses were named after people who had reputations for walking in the scene and snatching trophies. Then different groups would found houses and work on building their names by competing in balls.

The ballroom performers within this subculture (The Harlem Ballroom scene) regularly engage with and refashion beyond the mainstream or static ideas of who they are and should be in the larger world. I see this refashioning as a core part of fierce literacy, as the narratives
expressed in this documentary offer a glimpse into the lives of LGBTQ people and the communities they created. Specifically, the performers refashion terms, such as houses and housemothers, which complicate our understandings of each. They reify the terms and deconstruct them by engaging them in a context where Black queer people are denied their biological family and are forced to create new families to survive in a homophobic world. In the film, David Ian Xtravaganza discusses the ballroom scene as an alternate reality, where homophobia does not exist. He states, “It’s like crossing into the looking glass in Wonderland. You go in there and you feel...you feel a hundred percent right as being gay.” He goes on to say that the world outside of the scene is not like that at all. A common narrative throughout Paris and the larger gay community is that of gay youth being forced out of their houses by unsupportive and/or abusive parents and having to survive the best way they know how.

*Paris* performer Pepper LaBeija uses a similar narrative to discuss her role as a housemother in the ballroom scene. “I know this from experience because I’ve had kids come to me and latch hold of me like I’m their mother or like I’m their father, ‘cause they can talk to me and I’m gay and they’re gay….” In LaBeija’s comments, it is clear that identifying as Black (and Brown) and gay bonds members of the community as a family beyond just sex. Xtravaganza, who is crowned mother of year in the film, talks about having to help her kids get ready for the ball. “I do that one’s hair, the other one’s makeup. You know, choose their shoes, their accessories. I always offer advice, you know—as far as what I know and what I’ve been through in gay life.” She goes on to say that she has had to learn good and bad ways to survive because gay life is hard. It is through the recreation of the house and the housemother that a new community emerges, one that defies biological gender expectations. Yet it is a community that exists in conversation with what is going on outside the ballroom. In the next section, I look at
Language and Play in Paris

In discussing the language in *Paris*, I am focused on the terms and phrasing the performers use, how they frame their identities as Black gay and trans people, as well as members of the ballroom scene. One of the most memorable and widely discussed aspects of the film is how the performers remix and refashion language, particularly through reading and throwing shade. In the documentary, *reading* and *shade* are introduced on stark black title cards with white font, along with a host of other words, phrases, and descriptions of place specific to Harlem Ballroom culture. As Corey explains, reading is an elevated form of insult, and shade is somewhat of the subversive counterpart to reading. These language practices are critical for understanding Black Queer life and learning them are a rite of passage and means of survival.

The legacy of *Paris* exists within contemporary Black queer discourse. Corey’s description/performance of shade as “Shade is… I don’t have to tell you you’re ugly…” speaks to the embodied and performative nature of shade and many other Black queer literacy practices. Shade is a fierce literacy because it is a refashioning of language in terminology and framing. Shade comes from the African American tradition of verbal play called signifying, where participants make humorous statements making fun of one another. In *Word from the Mother*, Smitherman discusses the double meaning that takes place in signifying: “Although signifyin is tantamount to a ‘dis,’ an expression of disapproval, it’s acceptable because it is a well-known, long established Black verbal tradition, with socially defined rules and linguistic norms that
those born under the lash share” (70). In Paris, the participants engage in throwing shade in various scenes.

Corey compares the verbal play when a Black queer person is amongst Black straight people versus when they are amongst other Black queer people. Again, these practices shift as we move in and out of the ballroom scene. A straight person calling a gay person a derogatory name is everyday practice. In contrast, according to Corey, discourse and insult function as art, often also in everyday practice, in the ways that Black queer people perform reading and shade in our communities. Corey explains:

If I’m a Black queen and you’re a Black queen, we can’t call each other Black queens, ‘cause we’re both Black queens. That’s not a read. That’s just a fact. So, then we talk about your ridiculous shape, your saggy face, your tacky clothes. In this example, context informs how deep the read goes and how it is taken. Within the Black queer community, the focus is often placed on taking the finer points and making them larger than life for entertainment. Following Corey’s comments, viewers see Freddie Pendavis accuse another performer of wearing more makeup than his mother. Whether or not he actually had on makeup is irrelevant.

Corey continues to discuss shade in reference to a now legendary kerfuffle that took place during one of the balls that Livingston filmed. The scene begins with a voiceover of Corey saying the point of shade is to “knock ‘em out” and “hit ‘em below the belt.” Corey compares shade to the Olympics, where one can get disqualified for merely stepping on the wrong part of the mat. In this particular scene, we see David, Father of the House of Xtravanganza sauntering down the runway in a white men’s tuxedo jacket, black slacks, and a full-length fur coat feeling his beat. Then you hear announcer Junior LaBeija shout over the microphone “I SAID men’s
garments. Where are the men’s garments?” A visibly irritated David Xtravaganza responds “A man bought it mother fucker!” and continues to argue for the fur coat being a men’s coat by yelling that “It buttons on the right side!”

In this scene, a man walking in the high-fashion men’s category wearing a women’s fur is not read as a real or straight performance of “man” because it is not a men’s coat. So pointing him out for wearing a women’s fur is a disqualification and shade in the sense that it exposes him as not a real man without explicitly saying it. The scene is significant because it shows how the ballroom creates guidelines of gender normativity and, as I will discuss in the next section, “realness.” These guidelines exist in dialogue with gender norms outside the ballroom. Corey points out that the parameters of the categories used in the competition are arbitrary, using this incident as an example of the fine points people notice to throw shade. This scene also points to larger literacy normativity in the many ways mainstream or straight culture promotes and polices arbitrary standards of gender tied to clothing, which aim to exclude queer bodies from the dominant culture yet inform the rules of the ballroom scene.

*Deconstructing Realness*

While joining a house or learning the language may be the preliminary rite of passage into the ballroom scene, walking in a ball begins a performer’s journey toward becoming “real.” Everybody wants to be fierce and to perform the most authentic representation of his or her category as possible. The performances in *Paris* are arguably the most influential aspect of the film. In a lot of ways, the discourse and performances in *Paris* have helped Black queer people define themselves for themselves. Specifically, the performers’ discussions of walking the ballroom, voguing, and performing realness demonstrate the ways that the performers redefine themselves, as well as understand and trouble static notions of gender and class through
performance. Additionally, they help us understand how identity and literacy are informed and practiced through performance.

“Realness” is exactly what it sounds like. Safety as a concern for Black trans and queer people informs Dorian Corey’s morbid explanation of realness. He states, “When they’re undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway, and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the Femme Realness Queens.” In this example, a receipt for realness is being able to avoid transphobic attacks while walking down the street. This speaks to the amount of policing of queer bodies in the larger culture and to the performer’s ability to give the people what they want to see. As one performer put it, “You’ve erased all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the giveaways, to make your illusion perfect.” In the film, the idea of realness is built upon the idea of the performers being born biologically gay or queer men. In this context, the flaws are any signs of homosexuality in scenes where masculine needs to be performed or signs of masculinity during femme realness scenes. The goal is essentially to step beyond performing and to become the desired gender and/or sexual orientation.

In Paris, the performers’ comments demonstrate how gender is understood, policed, and performed. The performers reimagine and perform gender in ways that reveal possibility for safety and liberation. In a voiceover, one of the performers talks about the difference between straight people and gay people when it comes to self-awareness in a largely homophobic society:

When you’re a man and a woman, you can do anything. You can... you can almost have sex on the streets if you want to. The most somebody’s gonna say is, ‘Hey, get a hump for me, ‘you know. But when you’re gay, you monitor
everything you do. You monitor how you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act. ‘Do they see me? What do they think of me?’

In his statements, real manhood and womanhood are rooted in heterosexuality. Straight people do not have to worry about the violence that comes from dangerous homophobia as LGBTQ people do on a daily basis. The comments of the performers suggest, to some extent, that this self-monitoring informs the roles they play in the balls and in the larger world.

In a couple scenes, legendary femme queen St. Laurent is interviewed about her male to female transition and her hopes for the future. Throughout the film, St. Laurent is shown walking in various femme scenes, where announcers gush about how “real” and “soft” she looks. In one scene, viewers see St. Laurent walking and gracefully stepping onto a chair in her leopard print blouse and skirt. As she flips her hair and flashes her effortless smile, the crowd erupts in screams and the announcer yells that “The Virginia Slims girl is here,” referencing the cigarette advertisements that featured fashion models. Like the other performers, St. Laurent expresses a desire to be the best. She states, “Women don’t go out of their way because they are women. I went out of my way because I wasn’t, and I felt that I wanted to be the best I could be.” She does not consider becoming a woman a game but rather “something that I want to live.” She goes on to proudly state that she expects to be a “full-fledged” woman of the United States by 1988. I assume St. Laurent is referring to sex reassignment surgery, but it is not clear what she considers a full-fledged woman to be.

It is, however, clear what she considers beauty to be. In the next scene, St. Laurent is shown in her bedroom gushing over photographs of Paulina Kurkova and other models. She touches the photographs and states to the camera, “This is my idol, Paulina. Someday I hope to be up there with her. If that could be me, I think I would be the happiest person in the world. Just
knowing that I am... that I can compare to Paulina, to stand next to her and to take pictures with her.” One of the reasons St. Laurent wants to take pictures with her is because it would suggest that she is a comparable beauty to Paulina. It is important to note that in the poster of the models is Kersti Bowser, a Swedish Black model, yet she is not mentioned. During this scene, Livingtson also focuses in on an autographed photograph from Diana Ross that says, “To Octavia, A Very Beautiful Woman.” I mention these examples to demonstrate how St. Laurent surrounded herself with Black women who are perceived as beautiful in media. The fact is that Ross, arguably the most famous example of Black feminine beauty, authorizes Octavia’s beauty and thereby her realness as a beautiful woman.

In the Paris DVD outtakes, Livingston, who identifies as a lesbian, discusses feeling oppressed by many images in Seventeen as well as various hyperfemme ideals. However, St. Laurent’s femme gender performance has a liberatory effect on her:

There was something really freeing about hanging out with people like Octavia,

making a film about folk like that who feel like ‘Well if a biological man can be a far more real woman than I’m off the hook!

Livingston describes St. Laurent as “impressive” and “not a facsimile… these are women.” She goes on to say that St. Laurent and many members of the ballroom community’s performances display a competency in gender. The performer’s competency in gender is what I consider to be the most valuable aspect of the documentary, along with the historical elements. Livingston states: “It’s not a feminist theory. It is visceral.” For many members of the ballroom scene and transgender people today, it is not just a performance. In the case of many transgender sex workers, their wage and safety are often dependent on their ability to pass as a cisgender man or
woman. St. Laurent’s aspiration to work as a high-fashion womenswear model is also an occupation where a competency in gender performance is necessary.

Corey discusses a similar phenomenon at work with other members of the ballroom scene who perform in realness categories. Corey states that one can only get a job as an executive if they have the background and opportunity. Because of how racism and homophobia work to oppress Black queer people, it is hard for them to get opportunity. However, the ballroom allows individuals to fulfill these fantasies. He states, “You’re not really an executive, but you’re looking like an executive. And therefore, you’re showing the straight world that I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I could be one, because I can look like one.”

Corey’s comments echo a lot of “dress for the job you want” lectures I heard while I was a HBCU undergraduate student. While it can be argued that St. Laurent reifies Eurocentric standards of beauty by her admiration of white models and desiring to pose with them, I argue that St. Laurent and many of the participants reify these standards while simultaneously creating something new. Like Crystal LaBeija, she may have wanted to sit and be coronated amongst white beauty queens. However also like LaBeija, she creates a new aesthetic. By sharing her story and performances, she gives countless Black femme trans and queer youth a new beauty standard.

*Refashioning Space*

The performers discussion of the ballroom scene creates an opportunity to reimagine space. Specifically, the performers refashion our understanding of space by engaging with the performers’ larger lives outside of the ballroom scene. Their understanding of themselves as part of a larger Black queer community and history allows the performers to transcend space, time
and death in order to leave their advice to the next generation of Black queer people. For example, the documentary revolves around key scenes from various ballroom events but it really is about the lives of the performers in and out of the larger ballroom scene. By recording the scenes from various balls and performer interviews, Livingston gives the Golden Age of the Harlem Ballroom a chance to be relived and reimagined by people who would have never gone to a ball. For example, I was a fan of *Paris* years long before I ever attended a ball. The film allowed me to see into another world and in turn provided the tools to refashion and survive my own.

While *Paris is Burning* and the Harlem Ballroom scene are read as Black and/or queer spaces, occurrences inside and outside of the scene complicate static designations of space as Black, queer, straight or safe. The lives and performances of the performers complicate and refashion these static notions by putting Black queer life in conversation with White or normative life outside of the scene. The most explicit examples are the performers discussions of working and class. The performers aspiration to transcend poverty and live in the lap of luxury is a feeling to which most people can relate.

Dorian Corey warns the viewer not to misread the performers as lazy because living in New York City required that they have jobs. “A lot of them have little jobs now. They work. Don’t think they’re lazy. In New York City, you work or you starve. You work or... Some kind of work...Legal or otherwise. But you have to work to sustain yourself.” While the ballroom scene has been discussed as living the fantasy, the performers make it clear that even their fantasy is rooted in the material world. Sex work amongst ballroom performers was discussed in the film, primarily through the tragic narrative of Venus Xtravaganza. Venus is one of the many performers who had to leave home in order to live as a transwoman and was adopted by the
ballroom scene. Venus walks in the femme realness category. According to Venus, her ability to read as a woman allows her to make money as an escort. She points to her blonde hair, light skin, green eyes and the little features as coveted by Johns. One of the ways she resist possible judgment about being a sex worker is comparing her situation to that of a housewife.

If you’re married... A woman in the suburbs, a regular woman, is married to her husband and she wants him to buy her a washer and dryer set. In order for him to buy that, I’m sure she’d have to go to bed with him anyway, to give him what he wants, for her to get what she wants. So in the long run, it all ends up the same way.

Venus is being deliberately provocative when she compares her sex work to that of a housewife to encourage the audience to rethink negative opinions they may have about sex work. I do not believe that she sees her sex work as the same labor that housewives perform. However, she makes the comparison to take housewives off of a moral pedestal in order to create a space to understand her life without the stigma that accompanies sex work. She implicitly makes the argument that how she has to make money to survive is not so unlike how some married straight women have survived traditionally. She essentially critiques the idea that the work she does is any different or morally inferior to that of a wholesome housewife. Venus’ death at the end of the film speaks to the dangers of living as transwoman and working as a sex worker. As Angie discusses Venus’ death, Angie’s maternal love for Venus is clear. “I always said to her, ‘Venus, you take too many chances.’ ‘You're too wild with people in the streets. Something is going to happen to you.” Angie discusses finding out that Venus had been murdered and left underneath a mattress in a cheap hotel. Angie was the one who had to identify Venus’ body and tell her
family. My heart breaks every time I watch the film as Angie talks about their relationship. She states,

We used to get dressed together, call each other and say what we were gonna wear. And, you know, she was like my right hand, as far as I’m concerned. I miss her. Every time I go anywhere, I miss her. That was my main... the main daughter of my house, in other words.

I can feel the hurt in her words about Venus, while clips of a living and laughing Venus are shown during her comments. Her next statement is what brings me to tears. Angie goes on to flippantly say, “But that’s part of life, as far as being a transsexual in New York City and surviving.” Her statement places Venus’ heartbreaking narrative within a larger narrative of transgendered people in New York City and the larger world. Angie discusses dealing with Venus’ murder as a part of the larger and common experience of living as a transgendered person. It is also important to note that Venus’ tragic murder was featured juxtapose to her and other trans people laughing, having fun and enjoying life as themselves. Her death is not presented as merely a cautionary tale but also a celebration of her unabashed spirit which still lives in the film and the hearts of many Black queer people.

The performers’ desires for material possessions speak to an infatuation with wealth and the larger capitalist system that many would argue creates the circumstance within which they live. However, their comments also represent hope, an optimistic desire for life outside of the trappings of racial and sexual oppression. Junior LaBeija’s ballroom announcing style is an aspect of the film that fans often attempt to recreate. His grandiose tone and diction is that of a minister of music working as an announcer at the church fashion show. Many of my friends can be heard screaming “O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E, opulence! You own everything,” while walking down a
hallway or greeting each other. LaBeija’s comments capture many of the performers’ desires to perform and live wealthy.

Many of the performers hopes for the future are tied to having money because it offers them more flexibility to live their lives on their terms. So to read the performers as simply materialistic does not take into account the larger economic and social structure that constrain their ability to live and flourish. For example, Venus imagines herself as a rich white girl because she perceives a rich white girl as not having to struggle like many members of the ballroom scene. “I would like to be a spoiled, rich, white girl. They get what they want, whenever they want it. And they don’t have to really struggle with finances and nice things, nice clothes…” Here we see Venus also holding on to a literacy normativity about rich white girls, but to understand her pursuit of these material possessions, we need to understand issues of safety. Throughout the film, she describes scenes of confrontation, harassment, and abuse tied to her life as a transgender sex worker. Her survival in this world is tied to her need to pass and this underscores the tension between her pursuit of material possessions and her need to survive.

She goes to say that she wants to have her full sexual reassignment surgery so that she can be a complete woman. Octavia wants to have gender reassignment surgery as well and sees it influential in changing her circumstances. “I want to be a complete woman. And I want to be a professional model, behind cameras in a high-fashion world. I want so much more. I want... I want my name to be a household product.” It is clear that Octavia is seduced by the idea of fame, but I also detect a desire to be loved on her terms when she expresses a desire to hear “There goes Octavia,” while walking down the street. Venus and many other performers’ privileging of Whiteness, wealth and womanhood speak to the pervasiveness of White supremacy and Eurocentric values even in Black queer spaces. It is also clear that Venus’ and Octavia’
appearance and performances in and out of the ballroom scene allow them the ability to
temporarily to transcend the oppressions that meet their gender, race and class specific to living
as a transwoman in New York City. The emphasis Octavia and other performers place on gender
reassignment as a way to close the closet door and become complete reifies the larger
mainstream understanding of gender that essentializes genitalia as proof of a real male or female
identity.

By placing themselves in conversation with Black queer ancestors and descendants, the
performers write themselves into a larger Black and Latin queer community and experience that
binds time. Throughout the film, they perform critiques of a larger capitalist system that
disenfranchises Black, poor and queer people. My larger argument is that the performers know
how racial, gendered, class-based and sexual oppression function so they leave survival tips for
Black queer people. The performers critically engage with White supremacy and privilege within
a larger conversation of Black survival. For example, one of the performers discusses White
America or the American dream as an aspiration for minorities:

This is white America. Any other nationality that is not of the white set knows
this and accepts this till the day they die. That is everybody’s dream and ambition
as a minority -to live and look as well as a white person is pictured as being in
America.

He discusses the American dream as shown in the media, complete with a house, lawn and pool.
He goes on to discuss how minorities have had assimilate to survive:

And when it come to the minorities, especially black, we as a people, for the past
400 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of
civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all
learned how to survive. That is why, in the ballroom circuit, it is so obvious that if
you have captured the great white way of living, or looking...or dressing or
speaking—you is a marvel.

In these comments, the performer writes Black queer people into a larger history of minorities
that have had to survive White supremacy in this particular country or space. In this way, he
binds the stories of Paris ballroom performers with the stories of countless Black queer people
who lived both before and after the Golden Age of the Ballroom. His comments also speak to
Pritchard’s discussion of literacy normativity and how entrenched these problematic
understandings of race and class are in the literacies that many of us practice.

Corey, LaBeija, and Angie also work as mothers and griots to contextualize the golden
age of the ballroom within a larger history of Black queer people in New York City. For many,
the housemothers steal the movie due to their grand, charismatic personas and their extensive
knowledge and expertise about the scene. As the elders or grand dames of the scene, they are
called on throughout the film to explain the history and different aspects of the scene. In the
opening of the film, LaBeija introduces herself. “I am Pepper LaBeija, the legendary mother of
the House of LaBeija. Not the founder. Crystal was the founder. I’m... I just rule it now. With a
soft glove.” In this statement, LaBeija’s introduction does the dual function of introducing
herself as a grand legendary ruling mother while still telling the history of the house and
ballroom scene. Corey states that the new ballroom kids would not recognize a ball if it
“knocked them in the head” and discusses the original balls as being very different with less
prizes and fewer categories. LaBeija discusses the change in the ballroom scene from the 1960s
to the late 1980s:
When I first started going to balls, it was all about drag queens and they were interested in looking like Las Vegas showgirls — back pieces, tail pieces, feathers, beads and all that. But as the '70s rolled around, the things started changing. It started coming down. They just wanted to look like a gorgeous movie star—like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor. And now, they’ve went from that to trying to look like models—like Iman and Christie Brinkley and Maud Adams and all those children.

Corey echoes LaBeija’s sentiments about how the scene has changed. Corey states that with time the mood went from what you could create to what you could acquire. “I come from the old school of big costumes and feathers and beads. And they don’t have that anymore. Now it's all about designers.” Since the release of Paris, more houses and scenes have been created in cities around the world. In Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit, Marlon Bailey discusses how the trend of naming houses after major luxury brands continue today. With houses like Mügler, St. Laurent, and Mizrahi named after high fashion houses or brands, the emphasis on acquiring luxury brands as a way to signify status is still a trend in the ballroom scene today. Even the emphasis on gender reassignment surgery as a sign of “realness” and that one can afford the expensive surgery are examples of the changes Corey discusses. Through the telling of their narratives, the audience is able to understand how the ballroom has evolved and how the larger culture and system informs how the ballroom functions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wanted the focus of my dissertation to be on appreciating Black queer beauty and genius on their own terms rather than focus on oppression. I do not believe that is possible.
Larger institutional forces are at work to silence and erase Black and queer people. For this reason, it is imperative to engage with the ways in which Black and queer people have survived. The performers in *Paris* offer their narratives to the next generation through the film. Since *Paris*’ release, films such as *Leave It on the Floor*, *Pariah*, *Moonlight* and *Tangerine* and documentaries like *Strike A Pose*, *How Do I Look*, and *Kiki* continue this discussion Black queer lives within a larger Black queer cultural context and function as references points for Black queer youth. In this chapter, I engage with these narratives and discuss how they help us reimagine life outside of static ideas of who we are and what we deserve as Black queer people. Through this chapter, I want to encourage the field of composition and literacy studies to think beyond misconceptions about literacy and Black queer people, in regards to gender performance and sexual orientation, by engaging with their narratives.

Survival is the most important theme. I must echo Octavia’s daughter when she states we must remember that they survived. We must remember that there were Black queer people who wore what the hell they wanted to and defined themselves for themselves even in the face of death. The performers in the film and countless Black and Latino/a queer people have laid their bodies on the line to live free. Marsha P. Johnson, the Black transwoman who started the Stonewall Riots and Gay Pride, immediately comes to mind. Even though she threw the first punch against police when they attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn in 1969, she is often overlooked as the white mainstream gay movement celebrate Prides around the world and continue to Whitewash LGBTQ movement. *Paris* is a gift from our ancestors and living proof that we as Black queer people have always been here. Paris is proof that we survived. I am left with Corey comments about being remembered. He states, “Everybody wants to leave something...
behind them—some impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think, you’ve left a mark on the world...if you just get through it....”
CHAPTER 3

Throwing Shade in the Park: Literacy Narratives at Black Gay Pride

“Shade is… ‘I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you because you know you’re ugly. Now, that’s shade.”  —Dorian Corey, Paris is Burning

My experience with shade started before I understood shade specific to Black queer people.5

Growing up in my family, the verbal was everything. If you were not quick-witted and could not use your words like weapons…actually I’m not sure what happens because everyone in my family had this ability, regardless of education level. As a young child, my aunts and uncles would say, “he’s got the ‘gift!’” This often came after someone asked me a question or made a request and then I snapped back with an attitude or witty remark. It was not until I got older that I saw my relatives “getting a dig in” by alluding to someone’s poor grades in school, “bad” hair texture, underachieving kids, or weight problem. While I long engaged in this practice with friends and family, I would later come to see shade as “shade”—as a critical literacy in the Black queer community.

When I use the term literacy, I am riffing off of Eric Pritchard’s research along with other researchers who define literacy as a sociocultural communicative practice of meaning making that is not confined to words alone. As Pritchard explains in Refashioning Lives, there remains a need for research on the long tradition of Black queer language, vernacular, and the rhetorical trope of “shade” and “reading” prevalent among Black queer folks,

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5 I use the terms queer and gay interchangeably throughout this chapter. Most of the participants who appear in this study did not identify as queer. I use queer as an umbrella term to include transwomen and gay men because I believe it is necessary to queer understandings of the Black oral tradition that include Black queer lives.
which would extend what we currently know about Black English and expand
theories of “signifyin,” “masking,” and other features of African American
language practice. (244)
Pritchard urges us to resist narrow definitions of literacy and to see the complicated, rhetorical,
and embodied ways people make meaning. Shade represents one such literate practice. Informed
by an oppositional consciousness, it is a multilayered way of communicating that is situated in
the Black queer community. Despite significant work on literacy as a situated practice (Brandt;
Street; Gee), in the African American community (Banks; Richardson; Young), and in the LGBT
community (Alexander; Alexander and Rhodes), only recently have scholars looked at literacy at
the intersection of Black and LGBT people. Pritchard’s discussion of “rereading” highlights the
multilayered ways in which literacy operates, how its communicative potential is not always

Figure 1: The researcher, Seth Davis, left, and Patrick during 2013 interview. On the left
and right sides are the other participants.  

6 Center photograph by Marshall A. Lattimore.
transparent to everyone at the scene ("This is Not" 280). In this article, the social space I focus on is the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride 2013, where I discuss shade and shade narratives with seven men and one transgender woman. I chose Washington D.C. Black Pride in order to talk to out Black gay men and transwomen, who were familiar with shade and see themselves as a part of a larger Black queer community

As a Black gay man and member of the Black gay community, I recruited participants who had knowledge about Black gay slang and who self-identified as members of this community. I approached Patrick first because we made eye contact and he did a double take. So I figured he would be open to being interviewed. After talking with Patrick, he then recommended I interview some of his friends. I took on somewhat of a snowball methodology, where my participants then recommended other friends of theirs to interview. I asked participants to tell me what they thought shade was. Rather than providing a definition, each of them told stories and gave examples of times where they either threw shade or felt it. Rather than representing these interviews only via alphabetic representation, I filmed all the interviews, drawing on Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe’s methodology in digital research methods, seeing this as the only ethical way to capture this dynamic literacy in action. I also chose to represent participants stories through compilation videos that open each of the chapters. These videos are important to the claims of this essay in that they illustrate the embodied dimensions of literacy and more specifically explicate the central themes of this essay.

7 This study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University.
A central finding of this research is that participants typically relied on narrative to illustrate how shade was thrown; in fact, narrative is a necessary component to catch the shade or meaning/intent. These narratives provide situated examples of throwing shade while foregrounding the subjectivities or back stories that give throwing shade traction. In this way, throwing shade speaks to people’s relationships with each other, with language, and with the larger culture. In the following sections, you will meet Patrick, AJ, James, Brant, Xion, Donnell and Mervin who demonstrate how shade plays a complicated role in Black queer people’s construction of identity and community; but first I want to offer some background on shade as a signifying practice.

Some Background

Before engaging with the interviews, it is important to understand throwing shade within a larger African American practice of signifying. Like the dozens, shade as a communal literacy and performance of wit is not always appreciated outside Black and Latino contexts (Smitherman; Gates). Both Geneva Smitherman, in rhetoric and composition, and Henry Louis Gates, in African American and literary studies, have done seminal work on signifying as an oppositional consciousness, as a playful commentary, and as a serious social critique. Smitherman traces the dozens back to the verbal play practiced by the Efik, an ethnic group in Nigeria, from which many Black Americans descend. This group’s version of the dozens can be seen in the saying, “You are a child a mixed sperm,” underscoring the division between those in the community and those outside of it (77).

While playing the dozens, individuals trade barbs about each other’s mama in an attempt to prove verbal dexterity and shut everyone else down. Smitherman shares the classic example,
“You’re mama is so dumb that she thought a quarterback was a refund” (76). A group of friends will snap quips like this back and forth in an attempt to get the biggest laugh. Smitherman goes on to discuss how even though the dozens has gone mainstream, it is a practice informed and allowed by one’s membership in the Black community, and it carries the cache that one is hip and cool. As Smitherman explains:

Traditionally, the conversational participants would have to be known to one another. This is still true to some extent today. However, as “yo momma” done cross ovuh (like everthang in Black culture), people engage in the game who are not known to one another, but in these instances it is even more critical that they be true to the game. (77)

Smitherman shows the complexity of the dozens by highlighting how it does not reside exclusively among members of a particular community. Although the dozens is part of the Black oral tradition, it is not a bounded practice.

I see performances of reading and throwing shade as gay siblings to the dozens. The dozens and shade are both practices and performances, which are rooted in the Black community. Both are crafted to be over the top and to get the last laugh. Both also use verbal barbs to signify membership in the community. Yet, as Pritchard notes, reading and throwing shade are distinct to the Black queer community (Fashioning Lives 244). They are part of what Performance Studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson calls “snapping in queen culture” (128).

In “Snap! Culture,” Johnson argues that snapping and throwing shade are a part of a larger “bitchy” or “queen” culture among Black women and effeminate men. In his study of several Black gay men, he helps us understand snapping and throwing shade as Black gay performances. Snapping is talking shit, riffing, going off, or quipping back and forth to win by
getting the biggest laugh and/or the last word. I argue that shade is part of a literacy of talking back to or flipping meaning specific to Black women and queer people. As Johnson explains,

> Because snapping is associated with effeminacy and usually accompanied by the stereotypical “attitude” projected onto African-American women, African American gay men who want to present a more “masculine” image do not snap. To do so would be emasculating. (128)

This view was expressed by CB, a participant in Johnson’s study, who says that he did not snap at first because he did not want to be associated with the “girlfriend culture” of Black women and gay men. This tension underscores the complexity of shade and the linguistic ambivalence that the practice carries.

In order to throw shade, one must layer seemingly innocuous statements with gestures or facial expressions in order for a statement to signify multiple meanings or readings. “Throwing Shade,” the practice itself, is an example of signifying, while reading is the larger literate practice of deciphering and meaning making. The use of the term reading, said with special emphasis, to refer to a Black queer critical reading is another example of how this refashioning functions. Most people think of reading as decoding words in a sentence to derive meaning or understanding. But it is not only that. Reading and throwing shade are the art of insult in the Black queer communities. Reads and Shade are often over-the-top performances, which utilize wit and charisma, designed to entertain, build camaraderie and often to subversively insult. A read is the recitation and performance of an insult that demonstrates both keen perception and wit.

After interviewing participants and observing shade discourse amongst my friends and in popular culture, I have come to understand shade in several ways specific to the Black queer
community—and as a practice of survival. Echoing many of the same themes Johnson finds in his work, I have found that shade is or can be used to mean any or all of the following:

a) Shade as a subversive insult/compliment
b) Shade as ignoring someone accidentally or on purpose
c) Shade as talking shit to or about someone
d) Shade as playing or joking
e) Shade as in-house/group discussion
f) Shade as verbal sparring
g) Shade as a queer signifier in mainstream/popular culture

In the following sections, I turn to my analysis of interviews conducted at the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride festival where my participants discuss and tell stories about shade. I present my analysis as video compilations and prose in three parts: *Narrating Shade*, *Shade on the Out-side*, and *Shade to Survival*.

*Narrating Shade*

“If you’re gonna throw shade, it’s important to know the boundaries between shade and disrespectful. Its right there on the cusp.” —AJ

Figure 2: Narrating Shade
To access the video, click [https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/x8SXk97D](https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/x8SXk97D).
See appendix for transcript.
In this opening video, participants contemplate the meaning of shade: what is it, who throws it, and its meaning. I began by asking participants to define shade thinking that the focus would be a simple matter of definition. What I found, however, was that participants rarely gave a simple definition. Instead, the questions prompted narrative explanations that showed how shade was situated within a larger communicative practice, what I call a situated literacy. Participants relied heavily on narrative as a method to remember, define, and illustrate shade. Often, they drew on scenes from popular culture, personal stories, and hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate a larger communal understanding of this practice. For most, this was not simply a matter of answering one researcher’s questions, but rather something they talked about amongst themselves. More specifically, they show how shade is used to bond friends and shun others. Their conversations also provide insight into how gay men understand themselves as individuals, in cliques, and as members of the Black queer or gay community.

When Black queer people engage in reading and throwing shade, many are consciously connecting with Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which, for many, introduced the term and offered a look into these practices in action. For example, Patrick and Brant immediately reference *Paris* in their attempt to define the term. Patrick, in fact, suggests that one go to *Paris* for a definition. Although they do not explicitly reference the scene in *Paris*, they are no doubt thinking of Dorian Corey famously saying, “Shade is… ‘I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you because you know you’re ugly. Now, that’s shade.’” Here, Corey defines shade through demonstration, and this practice of defining by example was common among participants.

As the video begins, Patrick tells me that the definition of shade has changed over the years. In trying to provide a definition of shade, he references *Paris*, a documentary now three
decades old. Like a lot of Black queer people, myself included, Corey’s explanation heavily informs his understanding of what throwing shade as well as reading are and how it is practiced. Following Corey’s articulation of shade, Brant compares shade to haute couture and refers to shade as “haute teasing.” His movement and gestures work to signify a grandiose posture which signifies a sense of elitism. Brant’s explanation, like Corey’s, is both descriptive and performative without offering a singular definition.

This turn to narrative is important in illustrating the multiple ways that shade is read and performed. James discusses shade as playful “sass” but also sees it functioning as a way to “cut someone down with words.” Mervin echoes this sentiment, attributing shade to the Black gay community while also remarking on its duality:

When gay men get together…you’re joking around with your friends…but then sometimes when people are jealous or would be considered haters, they may say things to pull out something negative about somebody.

Mervin and James see shade as potentially light-hearted while also acknowledging that it can function negatively. Playfully insulting one’s friends about their insecurities, for example, can be fun if you know them well. Mervin states, “They may talk about the way that they look or the clothes that they wear.” However, it is easy to cross the line and offend someone. For example, AJ states, “If you’re gonna throw shade at someone, it is important to know those boundaries between shade and disrespectful.” Essentially, knowing, towing, and exploiting the line between the two are the hallmarks of a good shade thrower.
Brant claims that “in order to throw shade, you have to know someone.” He goes on to liken shade to teasing rather than harassing, the latter intending to offend. I then asked him how he sees shade as different from reading. He explores the distinction between the two when he describes shade as an “elevated insult” and teases out the nuance between shade and reading. He uses Abbott & Costello and Shakespeare as reference points to discuss shade, with the latter emphasizing a grand yet subversive read. In this way, Brant’s response is informed by Corey’s saying, “Shade comes from reading. Reading came first.”

It is important to note that Brant was the only white participant in the study. To illustrate shade, he turns to iconic white artists and performers while at the same time, in other parts of our interview, he acknowledges shade as part of a Black queer tradition. Still, he helps us to see shade as a heightened and subversive form of reading. What I appreciate most about his interview is that in giving his explanation, whether he realizes it or not, he is demonstrating shade on an embodied level. If you watch Brant during his explanation with the sound off, or in the images above, you see him sitting as a queen taking on a posture similar to Corey’s as he casually yet flamboyantly riffs on shade. Note the grandiose way he frames the discussion by
saying “shade to me” and how his hand flourishes, demonstrating a nonverbal performance that enhances his discussion of the differences between reading and shade.

Continuing the discussion about the duality of shade, AJ teases out the difference between shade and disrespect. In his example, calling a friend a walrus is outlandish and obviously playful, but asking what a stranger is wearing has more shady undertones. Patrick and Mervin also turn to personal narrative to describe situations in which shade is enacted, and in doing so, illustrate how shade is a communicative practice that is part of their literate lives as Black queer people. After seeing Patrick talking to guys on Jack’d, a gay hook-up app, one of his friends said he was giving “loose boots.” (“Loose” refers to what his friend sees as whore-ish behavior and “boots” is Black gay slang for very or extremely.) His friend’s ability to playfully tease him about being promiscuous and get away with it speaks to their relationship and the norms of their clique. Patrick’s telling of the narrative as humorous works to suggest this as well. Yet, as I have suggested, shade can also be cutthroat or something else entirely depending on the situation. It is the context as reproduced through these narratives, what I call literacy narratives about shade, that helps us understand the particular situation and thereby the intent. In this way, shade is always a rhetorical practice because of its attention to audience, time, and context.

Consider, for example, how Mervin uses shade as a defense mechanism in his story. Mervin tells me that he just ran into one of his ex-lovers at the Pride event and deliberately did not speak to him, which he provided as an example of shade. By pretending that he did not see his former lover, he was sending a message. The message could be that his life was now so full that he had no time to notice his former lover or it could be read as an intentional slight. In either case, it illustrates the ambiguous ways that shade is understood and performed. In reflecting on
this moment, Mervin critiques his actions and suggests that they represent unresolved feelings about the relationship.

I also asked participants who throws the best shade, and the answers varied from specific people to cultural larger groups. Patrick pointed to older queens (Black gay men and transwomen) as the ones who throw the best shade because of the wit that comes with maturity. “The older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade and… I’ve been read by an old queen just as a friend, and it be jokingly, but it’s actually really like wow, like I would’ve never thought of that.” Patrick professes amazement for his older friend’s shade acumen. In his comments, there is a reverence for older queens or the elders as experts as expressed in Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*.

Donnell and Xion describe white gay men as being their favorite shade throwers. Specifically, Donnell teases out a difference between white gay men reading/throwing shade and Black gay men. While a white gay man may say that someone looks “a mess,” a Black gay man might say he looks “turned naked, back.” In the Black queer community, the word “back” is a term often used similar to “boots” to mean “very,” functioning as an exclamation point. Here, Donnell is essentially telling the person that he looks so bad that he should turn naked instead. He uses the example to demonstrate how white gays “give him his life” because they are often more direct and do not go for the extreme laugh.8

When I asked the same question to Patrick, he remarked how elders in the Black queer community did it best, with a wit that come with maturity. His acknowledgement of older queens

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8 Note that we’re two Black men at a Black gay pride event talking about a Black cultural phenomenon and still, Donnell ranks white gay men above Black gay men.
as being the best at throwing shade is an example of this. “The older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade and…I’ve been read by an old queen just as a friend, and it be jokingly, but it’s actually, really, like wow, like I would’ve never thought of that.” Patrick professes amazement for his older friend’s shade acumen. Similarly, Paris honors the knowledges and experiences of the older queens and housemothers. I have had similar experiences in my family and in the Black gay community, where the older queen had the most bone chilling shade in the room. Even in Paris, the house mothers and fathers are the ones teaching “the children.”

AJ answers my question by suggesting that he is the best shade thrower, but then points to his friend Mervin. When recruiting participants at D.C. Black pride, I expected to only interview Black and Latino men and trans-women. However, after a couple of interviews, some of my participants, Patrick in particular, insisted I meet Brant “because he’s white and throws shade.” As I stated earlier, I am not arguing that Black women or queer people of color are the only people who throw shade; however, they are the ones who are most connected with the practice in the public imagination.

Patrick began our interview saying that he did not know what shade was. It was only through his telling stories about himself and his peers that a definition emerged. He goes on to say that he sees shade as “calling them out in a smart way” and “saying it without saying it.” As I have demonstrated here, participants tended not to give an explicit definition. It was only through narrative that they sometimes appeared to discover the answer themselves. In the next section, I look at how shade is appropriated in popular cultures.
Shade on the Out-Side

“I think that once you go outside the community, it changes the meaning of what (shade) means for us.” —Mervin

Figure 4: Shade on the Out-Side
To access the video, click. https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/z9BEm2s4.
See appendix for transcript.

As suggested in the last section, shade is in vogue. It circulates within the Black queer community and also outside of it. Many of the participants observed how shade was being appropriated in popular culture. It is typically considered an in-house practice amongst Black queer people who know each other well. So when the word and the practice are taken out of the community and even commodified in popular culture, it impacts how we understand the practice, who we see as authorities on the subject, and our overall experience with it. Most of the participants express ambivalence about the multiple ways that shade and Black queer life have been appropriated in mainstream white heterosexual culture. They cite examples from their personal lives, social media, and daytime and reality television to demonstrate how shade has been taken up outside of the Black queer community. What I hope to demonstrate here is how
shade is culturally situated, how it cannot be understood in static terms, and how it has gone viral.

In recent years, shade has found its way in the Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, which defines it as “US slang”: “to express contempt or disrespect for someone publicly especially by subtle or indirect insults or criticisms.” But as I have shown, it is a practice that goes back decades, and its appropriation is not new either. Madonna’s 1990 hit song and video “Vogue,” for example, used a Black queer phenomenon without explicitly naming it. More recently, it has become popular on reality television such as Real Housewives of Atlanta and RuPaul’s Drag Race. The participants also discuss how shade is taken up across social media. Specifically, AJ, Donnell, and Xion discuss how digital spaces are often ripe place to throw shade without having to deal with the consequences.

Patrick talks about seeing the Black gay lifestyle merge with mainstream society and mentions Beyoncé’s and Jennifer Lopez’s music videos that feature the nonverbal/dance form of shade: voguing. Patrick goes on to mention the singer and reality television star Tamar Braxton’s usage of Black queer slang such as “Girl, get your life” and shade as examples. Similar to Brant, Patrick does not just reference Braxton’s appropriation of gay lingo, but he also performs it. He takes on an over-the-top tone and manner to illustrate how it is done. He then expresses ambivalence about how shade is being appropriated in popular culture: “It’s good because it is getting us out there and it’s sad cuz it’s kind of our identity that’s being kind of taken.” His comments about “us” and “our identity” and his overall concern with the effects of this appropriation suggest what some might call a Black queer nationalism, the desire to hold on to specific practices, texts, and spaces as Black and queer. Even though I see shade as wed to Black
women’s speech acts and literacies, I can relate to Patrick’s ambivalence over Black gay language being used in spaces where Black gay folks are often not welcomed.

Others pointed to examples of Black queer culture being appropriated in television and music. In order to discuss shade in mainstream culture, Brant tells a quick narrative about how shade is one many Black queer cultural texts that has been appropriated by white people. He mentions *Paris* and voguing as two of several Black queer cultural texts that existed first amongst Black queer people before finding their way into Black communities at large and being appropriated by the larger white mainstream culture. He jokes “Then Madonna took it and made it ‘Things for White people.’” We both laugh at the absurdity of his statement said in jest, especially as it runs juxtapose to the history that he just sketched. Still, Madonna’s influence in the mainstreaming of the dance drawing on Black and/or gay culture cannot be overlooked.

AJ mentions *Real Housewives of Atlanta, Married to Medicine* and *Bad Girls Club*, which all have majority Black female leads, as reality television shows that have incorporated shade and other Black gay lingo into cast discussions, programing, and advertisements. In a reality television context, shade or throwing shade is the perfect phrase to denote the subversive insults and statements that are at play as people are put into situations with people they do not like where they have to constantly discuss each other's personal business. In this way, shade thrives on reality television, and many of these show’s proximity to Black gay meccas such as Atlanta, New York and Washington D.C. can also explain how the term shade has so much traction in these heterosexual spaces. The widespread circulation of the term and literacy has made it trendy for many people outside of the Black gay community.

For example, AJ states “I think it’s something that’s become really popular in the culture now. I even have some straight male friends say *Oh, that’s the shade.*” In this way, straight
people are appropriating the term to describe a phenomenon. They evoke and play with the ethos of a Black queer person. Shade becomes a discursive olive branch of sorts to engage with a Black gay person(a) and Black gay culture more largely.

Donnell and Zion mention TMZ, Joan Rivers, and Wendy Williams as mainstream media entities who use Black queer language. Donnell states, “Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny.” We go on to talk about the fact that Joan Rivers, who would famously joke about her own appearance and plastic surgeries, was funny and good at throwing shade because she could make fun of and throw shade at herself. Xion goes on to mention Wendy Williams and how she plays with people’s accusations that she is a transgender woman by joking during her show that she has to get out of her drag after filming. “I thought that was hilarious. It’s the shade within itself,” Xion says. Even on an aesthetic level, drag makeup and culture have been appropriated by mainstream makeup and media entities. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* features challenges in every episode that educate the viewer and the queens themselves about the Black gay roots of gay culture and white mainstream culture.

Several of the participants are uneasy with Black gay culture in the mainstream. For example, I quote Mervin at the beginning of this section when he states that he feels that the meaning of shade and other Black and/or queer cultural texts change when they are co-opted by white culture. At first when I ask if shade should be used outside of the Black queer community, he states that no one should throw shade, taking into account the negative forms of the practice. When I clarify that I am talking about white appropriation of shade, he explains, “Once you go outside the community, you’re changing the definition of what it means for us and I find that that is an issue with a lot of the things we do.” The “we” he refers to I assume is Black gay people, but he could easily be talking about the ways Black, Latin, gay and other minority cultures are
routinely appropriated. He goes on to say, “Pretty soon there will be a whole different definition to the term shade.” Language and literacy more generally are not static and evolve over time. However, Mervin is speaking specifically about the ways white heterosexual culture often oppress Black, Brown queer people and their cultures, while simultaneously aping and commodifying our cultural productions for higher profit.

Brant discusses shade’s appropriation by straight people by telling a narrative about two of his female friends (one Black and one White) on Facebook asking what was shade. He forwards them an article that defines the term. He goes on to tie shade to a larger history of drag in the Black community. I hesitate as I ask Brant if he feels shade is a “Black thing.” I hesitated because I did not want him to feel uncomfortable about being asked about something that is marked as Black. I did not want him to think I was challenging his authenticity or right to use to the term. In retrospect, his attendance at Black Gay Pride shows how he is comfortable with Black gay culture even if he had not reflected on his position as a white gay man in this community.

Brant states that he would not say that shade is still just a Black thing and says “There are cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another.” So in a sense, it is understandable that there is some overlap and that white and/or straight people often use ethnic cultural terms or engage texts that are trendy without knowing about them. He playfully teases, “No one can be educated on the history of shade unless they’re writing a doctoral thesis on that.” For the record, I caught that shade and it is a dissertation and an article, not a thesis. I laughed though. Brant discusses shade’s origins in the Black gay community and explains how the larger gay (read white) community has taken up Black gay culture. He states that white people do not use shade unless they are quoting or evoking Blackness. When he says
this, his body language and arms gesture towards the embodied and performative nature of shade, as in when white people use shade as a term they are often referencing shade in a Black context or from a Black person even if they do not say it. This exists in a larger conversation about cultural appropriation, specifically where white people often have more freedom to evoke ethnic personas than ethnic people.

Lastly, I ask the participants if they see a lot of shade on social media and digital spaces. Most report that they see a lot of shade in outlets such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. James and I discuss twitter as a shade breeding ground because the character limit forces people to cram their read into 140 characters. However, he goes on to say that he does not look for shade in social media. In response to the question, Xion yells, “Yeah! They read for filth!” as she and Donnell discuss the various shady memes and conversations that they have observed on social media. Xion discusses how people manipulate arrows in the comments section to bring attention to a specific person in order to throw shade. Then, Donnell discusses the use of “#iDied” as phrase to signify that an image or statement was so funny and/or ridiculous that it literally killed the viewer on sight. Both of these are examples of how Black queer people actively manipulate language and digital spaces using very few characters. Donnell goes on to use an example of a meme of a girl with short hair squeezed into a ponytail with the phrase “Bitches be like, ‘My hair growing.’” Mervin then teases the meme out. The punchline of the joke is that many Black people share the cultural knowledge or memory of a girl who was trying to grow or give the eurocentric illusion of long hair but clearly had short hair. Mervin goes on to laugh at the scenario. “You look at ’em like ‘You know damn well your shit ain’t growing. You lying like shit.’” AJ, who works with queer youth, discusses the ramifications of shade and cyberbullying. “It’s really sad cuz I work with the youth and a lot of times they won’t throw
shade to their face, but they’ll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone.” These typically in-house conversations now take place with a global audience of more than Black queer people thanks to the Internet and social media. This definitely impacts how the shade is received and makes it more extreme. It is the difference between literally the whole hallway laughing at you and what feels like the whole world laughing at you via social media.

*Shade to Survival*

“But not everyone can throw shade at me. I wouldn’t allow it.” —Patrick

Figure 5: Shade to Survive

To access the video, click [https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/Ji36PeZt](https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/Ji36PeZt).

See appendix for transcript.

In earlier sections, we saw the different ways shade has been evoked—from playful shade to shade as “the ultimate,” as Donnell and Xion refer to it. Participants often moved beyond the notion of shade as just verbal sparring, seeing it rather a rite of passage among friendship groups, a sign that you can take the heat and are part of the community. Still, for some, shade is a byproduct of insecurity within the community, often suggested by larger racist, classist,
transphobic, effemephobic and sizeist ideals promoted by the dominant culture. In this way, shade is a tool for survival, simultaneously working to mock the oppressive forces at work.

In the “Ugly Side of Shade Culture.” Jamal Lewis writes about shade as a protective armor used to combat oppression. “Its armor,” he writes, “protected me from bullying and the harsh realities of gender-based violence and body shaming throughout middle school, high school, and my early years of college.” He continues by saying that he does not see shade as positive, noting that he cannot recall shade “ever being a fun thing to do.” He writes, “I later freed myself from this armor because it began to feel toxic — it wasn’t healthy, even in instances when I used it to defend myself.” Former NFL player Wade Davis and managing editor of The Feminist Wire Darnell Moore (Moore and Davis) discuss shade in a similar way in their Huffington Post conversation “Tongues Untied: Shade Culture—Throwing Shade, Reflecting Light.” Davis does not see shade as mean-spirited but rather as a way for guarded individuals to protect themselves:

I realized that many of our young people use shade to engage each other because many of them have been kept at a distance by people in their own lives. I found most of their shade performative, meaning they were just doing it to gain favor or the attention of another, and it had very little to do with intentionally wanting to hurt the person being shaded.

I am divided when it comes to shade. I love talking shit. Rather than relying on typical scripts— “Good Morning” “So how’s that dissertation coming?”—I and the participants in the study see throwing shade as an art form and as a way of building connections. My friends and I have fun riffing, signifying, and playing with language. Still, I can think of many instances in my life where shade has gone wrong, and I have also used shade as a crutch instead of talking to
people directly about the things that were bothering me. I titled this section “Shade to Survive”
to highlight the way that the participants and I have used shade simultaneously to get a laugh,
build friendships, and as a form of protection. Darnell Moore ask:

But what are we trying to protect ourselves from except the possibility of
connection and love? Maybe shade is the result of our fear that if we are too nice
or too open or too vulnerable (God forbid), others will hurt us.

While I appreciate Moore’s sentiment, I also recognize the brutal realities that many Black
LGBTQ people face on a daily basis.

At the start of the video in this section, Patrick speaks to some of the messiness of shade,
how it does not fit neatly into a negative or positive box. When I asked him if throwing shade is
always a negative thing, he put his shades on like it was a music video and answered “No.” To
be honest, I thought the question was a bit redundant because we were just talking about shade in
the context of his friendship group. His response, however, illustrated the complexity of shade.
He said, “It’s a way to confirm your friendships” showing it as both community strengthening
and as a survival tactic. His response speaks to the intimate cliques to which many of my
participants and many gay men belong. Nothing is off limits among participants who rely on
their wit and candor to throw shade among their friends.

This makes a clear in-group and out-group when it comes to shade because one’s friends
can typically broach delicate subject easier than someone on the outside. Patrick speaks to this
differentiation by stating that not just anyone—that is, people who aren’t his friends—can throw
shade at him because he “wouldn’t allow it,” meaning everyone knows not to try it with him
because he would “clap back” against it. Here, Patrick suggests he can check or discipline
anybody who shades him outside of his clique. His attitude speaks to the larger fierce or grand
persona that informs the practice of throwing shade. However, he enjoys shade when his friends throw it because he recognizes “the art of shade is wit” and that everybody cannot do it. Following Lewis, Davis, and Moore, these comments remind me of how nebulous the intent of shade can be and how the practice can often be informed by real hurt and insecurities, which causes rifts in relationships.

An interesting finding was that the participants often read themselves or their situations. For example, Xion describes her plight as a D.C. performer. Looking at the stage where she is scheduled to perform, she and Donnell laugh with the realization that few people will be there and that Xion will likely be coming home with little in tips.

Xion: I can come out and say, “Oh, I just feel like doing this event. As a performer, I’m gonna make $50.”

Donnell: Okay!

Xion: In the back of my head (long pause). Shade is, look at the crowd, look at the population I’m serving, look at where the stage is. I don’t see it happening. Shade is evident to those who understand the impossibility of Xion making $50 considering the location of the stage and the sparse audience. Donnell cosigns and respond by affirming, “You gon’ make your fifty dollars” because it is clear given the circumstances that she is not. Similar to the performers in Paris, Xion and Donnell, like many Black queer people, often signify and play off of situations by throwing shade.

In this example, Xion and Donnell evoke a “laugh to keep from crying” rhetoric to cope and have fun with even disheartening situations. They go on to discuss shade being informed by context and intent. In order to explain shade, many of my participants attempted to remember instances where they threw shade or shade was thrown at them. However, Donnell provides
examples of shade in action when he throws shade at Xion. He calls Xion Erykah Badu because she is wearing a gele similar to the singer’s. By saying this, he is playfully teasing her for looking like Badu, which could be an insult to some people especially in a culture where Blackness and Afrocentrism are regularly critiqued.

Xion makes it clear that she is not one of those people and appears to take it as a compliment by quickly responding, “I live for Erykah.” Another read of Donnell’s shade is “I see you think you look like Erykah Badu, but you don’t.” Donnell goes on to complement Xion on her style suggesting that the shade he was throwing was for fun and not designed to hurt her feelings. He explains that they are friends and that if someone else threw shade at him, he would cut them up. He goes on to say “When she gets up in them, she’s cunt.” In this statement, Donnell clears up any misunderstandings about his true feelings about Xion by suggesting that when she gets dressed up, she is ultra femme.

Xion and Donnell also talk about the performative aspect of shade when they discuss how one detects it. Specifically, Xion states that “It’s not what you’re saying but how you convey it” and that it’s the force you put behind your words and the setting that signifies the perceived intent of the message.

Figure 6: Donnell enacts Xion throwing shade.
Donnell, as illustrated in the montage above, also points to the nonverbal dimension of shade using Xion as an example. He states that he can tell when Xion detects and throws shade just by how her body moves: “Now when she throws shade, she doesn’t just do it with her face she goes…” Then Donnell (in character as Xion) begins contorting and making noises as if his body is shifting in order to throw shade. He continues, “and I be like ‘Xion! Stop!’” Xion nods and confirms, “My whole body reacts.”

Because Brant’s friends are Black, he is part of the friendship network of the participants in this study. When I tell Brant his friends say that he is the best shade thrower, he blushes and is obviously flattered by Patrick’s notion of him being the best shade thrower in his clique. However, he goes on to say that he is someone who deflects a lot but does not mean harm when throwing shade.

When I throw shade, I may present myself...as being regal, distancing myself a little from it, a little bit, because I don’t wanna look like I’m trying to hurt someone’s feelings. So when I making fun of you…I do it in this overt very grandiose way. So it looks like I’m presenting a joke instead of like I’m hurting someone’s feelings.

I can relate to Brant’s hesitation and sensibility to throwing shade and receiving shade because throwing shade often creates a hostile situation between people who do not know each other or at least do not know each other “like that.” He offers a Facebook example that walks the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate shade. Weight and size can be sensitive issues in the queer community. Brant’s and the other person’s candor suggests a congenial relationship but they do not confirm it. While Brant states that the exchange was lighthearted, the move to present oneself as being unbothered or immune to the shade is common in the Black gay
community. Brant states that his friend’s response was meant in jest but his demeanor suggested that it might have hit deeper. Brant’s desire for his friend to enjoy getting the bigger laugh is at the heart of throwing shade. However, throwing shade is like Russian roulette in the sense that it is hard to gauge how far is too far and what insult will deal a destructive blow or get your ass whipped.

Conclusion

By doing on the spot interviews about shade with Black queer people, I was able to examine the ways that shade works as a rite of passage and literacy of survival. This study demonstrated how shade and literacy are more generally understood via conversation in this particular context. The interviews with the participants confirmed “throwing shade” as a Black queer cultural happening and practice. Many of the participants shared pop culture examples, shade stories, and anecdotes in order to tease out throwing shade as an on the spot literacy—that is, a language practice that is impromptu and in response to a particular cultural moment. Due to time and financial constraints, I was only able to interview a small number of participants in one location. In future research, I would like to interview more people and observe interactions amongst friendship groups in order to more deeply catch literacy in action as it is born out of Black gay men and transwomen’s lived experiences.

In order to understand shade as an embodied literacy of survival, we must engage with the history of racial and sexual oppression and violence against Black queer people in the United States since the Middle passage. In Paris, a voiceover discusses the ways Black people have been stripped of their culture and forced to assimilate to white ideals of language, beauty, dress, professionalism and decorum in order to survive a larger white supremacist society.
And when it come to the minorities, especially black, we as a people, for the past 400 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive.

However, what must be understood is that Black people have not simply assimilated to whiteness. We, as Black people, have figured out ways to maintain, mix and mesh who we are in order to survive in hostile spaces. Even though Black people in many ways have been stripped of our African languages and cultures, I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival that has existed within the Black community and connects us back to a larger Black oral tradition. In this way, Black queer people are not being “added” to the tradition but rather this work demonstrates that we have always been a part of it. In addition to understanding shade as a rite of passage into Black queer communities and a self-defense mechanism, shade represents a larger Black queer literacy of refashioning language and meaning making that speaks back to and riffs off of shared knowledge and tropes specific to Black queer life. While this examination of throwing shade has demonstrated the multiple ways that Black queer people refashion static understandings of language, the following chapter focuses on “pullin’ trade” and demonstrates how we refashion static understandings of sexuality in regard to orientation and gender performance in order to narrate our sexual experiences with men who identity as heterosexual.
“Pullin’ Trade: Sexual Identity, Ambiguity, and Literacy Normativity”

“Trade are like the unicorns of the world. People are fascinated by unicorns because they don’t really exist but have this magical presence. The mysteriousness that trade carries is kind of like magic in a sense.”
—Courtney, participant

Chance: “What is wrong with us Black gay men?”

Noah: “It’s not just Black men…. Gay men in general seem to idolize these hypermasculine ideals. For us, it’s homo-thugs. For white queens, it’s the college jock Abercrombie types…. We’ve become completely invested in aping hetero-identities.

Alex: “It’s all so boring. Just give me a big ole queen any day!”
—“Don’t Make Me Over,”
_Noah’s Arc_, 2005

“All men cheat. That’s why they’re called trade. Do them just as dirty as they do us. Out here it’s all about our hustle, and that’s it.”
—Alexandra, _Tangerine_, 2015

Sexuality is typically understood through pathologies. For example, sexual orientations such as gay, straight, bisexual, or queer are treated as static and often lead people to fixate on particular sexual practices and orientations that they neatly fit into. For many men, there is often a resistance to engage with experiences that complicate static ideas of sexual orientation and identity. Larger homophobic and effemiphibic forces inspire many men to resist femme, bottom, or queer personas in casual and professional spaces for fear of being harassed, ostracized, or not seen as sexually attractive. However, the resistance to identifying as queer or femme does not necessarily keep these men from engaging in queer activity.
Trade is a term Black gay men and transwomen use to refer to these men. By using the term trade, I am not attempting to offer another sexual orientation but rather, I use the term as an invitation to denaturalize normative understandings of sexual orientation and practice as inherently tied to biological sex or gender performance.

This chapter focuses on literacy narratives about pullin’ trade. Amongst close friends, Black queer people often share sexual narratives about sleeping with straight men both for fun and to speak back to dominant heteronormative scripts. I refer to these stories as literacy narratives because they point to sexual experience as a site of knowledge. As I described in earlier chapters, literacy needs to be understood as embodied and as a way of being in the world (Prior and Shipka). In sharing their perspectives on trade, participants are quite literally checking their bodies, describing how they come to know themselves and others around them—and specifically, how they understand sexual orientation beyond static labels. Whereas in chapter three, I turned to the experiences of Black queer people at 2013 Washington D.C. Black Pride, here I turn to 2017 Harlem Pride, this time to talk with Black men and transwomen about trade.² I once again collected interviews via video, although as I discuss later, this presented new challenges when discussing trade.

I argue that pullin’ trade is a fierce literacy. When I use the term literacy, I am also building on Jonathan Alexander’s work on sexual literacies, as expressed in Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice. Specifically, he argues that the stories we tell about sex and

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² One of my participants was a white transwoman. I included her, as I included a white gay man in chapter two, because she is part of this discursive community and was introduced to me by another participant.
sexuality are central to who we are individually, collectively, and politically. He goes on to describe literacy as being able to critically engage with stories of sexuality and understand the complex ways sexuality informs our lives. He writes:

I call this particular kind of literacy *sexual literacy*—the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms. (5)

Alexander’s emphasis on the importance of stories is in line with how I see stories working in Black gay communities. I consider pullin’ trade as both a sexual literacy and a fierce literacy. It occupies the space between cultural/Black literacies and sexual/queer literacies. In the practice of pullin’ trade, Black gay men illuminate the messiness of how we often understand sexual identity and performance as static. Pullin’ trade also reminds us of how space and context inform how we understand these things to function. The practices of telling narratives about pullin’ trade serve as a sexual literacy and rite of passage into those communities for Black gay men and transwomen.

Friends and close acquaintances, regardless of race and gender, often share sexual stories with me in order to counsel or to bond. However, passing for straight or as trade has a specific cultural capital in the lives of Black men. The ability to pass for straight or to be seen as attractive to straight men is often privileged in many gay groups and spaces. For these reasons, sex stories about virginity loss and hooking up with straight men are often the stories that are circulated and reproduced in the community. Static ideas of sexual identity within the Black community often point to homosexual contact or even the acknowledgement of homosexual feelings as a signifier of a gay identity. It is through telling and retelling these stories in
conversation with other Black gay men and transwomen that many of us come to understand ourselves as Black and gay. My examination of these narratives illustrates how many ideas of sexual literacies and identities are reproduced as static and mutually exclusive. However, the stories reveal the many ways Black queer people have worked through and outside these misuses of literacy.

In my analysis of the narratives, Black queer people’s discussion of trade frequently engaged with a gray area of sexual identity. Specifically, the participants told stories and presented hypothetical situations to offer a queer-counter narrative or an oppositional read of heterosexual men. It is this ability to read and share against dominant scripts that I see as a fierce literacy. Their discussion of pullin’ trade engaged two themes or truths in the gay community that run counter to dominant sexual scripts: First, “just because he’s straight, does not mean he won’t…” and second, “all tops aren’t masculine. All bottoms aren’t feminine.” In order to discuss why these statements are presented as literacies that speak back to dominant scripts of sexuality, it is necessary to discuss Harlem Pride as a Black queer space and how the participants’ truths are in conversation with men’s ambivalence about claiming queer identities within and outside of Black queer communities.

Invisible Lives: Pullin’ Trade as a Literacy and Reflections on Methods

Harlem Pride is a Harlem-specific Pride festival organized and geared towards queer people of color. I picked Harlem Pride as a research site because it is heavily populated by Black gay men and transwomen who would be familiar with Black queer language and culture. I recruited participants who had knowledge about Black gay slang and who self-identified as out gay men or transwomen. I interviewed eight queer people. The interviews lasted between three and ten minutes. I interviewed four of the participants in pairs (Courtney and Victor, and Jason and
Oreill) and four individually (Harmonica, Giana, Ashley, and Joseph). Similar to how cliques work outside of research contexts, the participants introduced me to their friends who were invited to participate as well.

I knew Victor from college, and he introduced me to Courtney, James, and Oreill. I met Joseph at Harlem Pride who introduced me to Ashley, and she introduced me to Giana. I also knew Harmonica, a well-known drag queen, through a friend. I asked participants to tell me what they thought trade was, how it was used in the Black queer community, and in what ways they see gender performance playing a role in how they read Black men. The participants clearly teased out their knowledge about trade as a counter knowledge, or as I call it, a fierce literacy, specific to Black queer people, that runs counter to dominant understandings of sexuality.

Several of the participants would either preface or end statements by pointing to common assumptions or misconceptions only to speak what they saw as the real truth rather than the easy or obvious truths that some have been led to believe. Inspired by Prichard’s work, I present my analysis in the form of mandates. In “Like Signposts On the Road,” Prichard discusses how Black queer people engage transgenerational mandates from Black queer ancestors to become ancestors themselves and pass on knowledge:

Two powerful themes that were common across participants’ life stories were the sense of sharing a continuum of literate and rhetorical practices with ancestors and the concept of one’s own role as a future ancestor. Descendants see the uses of literacy in their own lives as mandates to be a source of power and knowledge

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10 This research was approved by my university’s Institutional Review Board.

Participants chose to use their first names in the study.
for future generations of Black LGBTQ people, just as the ancestors’ lives and works had been to them. (32)

In chapter two, I suggested that the interviews presented in Paris with legendary ballroom performers Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, and Angie Xstravaganza are passing on knowledge to a new generation. As a researcher drawing on ethnographic methods, my aim has been to share the understandings of members of the Black queer community to leave mandates for the next generation who have to survive similar oppressive forces.

I had intended to feature videos in this chapter as I had done in chapter three, but two issues prevented me from doing so. First, I encountered technological difficulties and had to resort to audio recording in some cases. However, there was another complexity as well. Participants were not as interested in talking about trade on video in a public place—as they were when I asked about shade. Nevertheless, I was still able to capture valuable data that I present here without multimedia. I found that participants repeatedly cited heteronormative notions of sexuality often to deconstruct them in order to narrate their experiences. Even though Harlem Pride can be understood as a Black queer space, the participants comments speak to the multiple ways Black queer people create identity and shared knowledges in conversation with larger heteronormative ideals and forces.

_Complicating Space and Identity_

Marlon Bailey’s and Jeffrey McCune’s examination of Black gay men’s gender performance in Black gay clubs and the Detroit ballroom scene demonstrate the many ways spaces create opportunity for Black men to engage in sexual identities that exist outside static categories of gay and straight. In Bailey’s examination of Detroit ballroom scene, he found that gender is not
understood in a realm by itself but rather in conversation with sexual orientation and performance. In dominant understandings of sexual literacy, heterosexual gender and sexual performance are conflated (i.e., men are tops and women are bottoms). Black gay culture provides an illustration of how these static ideas of gender and sexual performance do not always function so simply. In fact, Bailey’s work illustrates this point.

In the ballroom scene, the gender system is informed by larger heteronormative understandings of gender but is not limited to them. Some of the gender performances include Femme Queens (Transgender Women MTF), Butch Queen Up in Pumps (Gay Man in Drag), Butch (Transgender Men FTM), Women (Biological Females), Man/Trade (Masculine & Straight identified) and Butch Queen (Gay Men masculine or feminine; Versatile). Bailey discusses Lovely, one of the Femme Queen ballroom performers, particularly her relationship with her boyfriend, which speaks to expectations of gender and sexual performance. He writes:

Another example is Lovely’s boyfriend, a Man who, according to Lovely, had never ‘ messed around’ before. Lovely considers her boyfriend to be a Man ‘ because he doesn’t do what bisexual men do. I don’t date men that suck penis or bend over. If they want to play with the penis that totally defeats the purpose for me. (43)

Bailey goes on to state that in the ballroom community, the identity of “Man” is constituted by gender, sexuality, sexual practice, and position. By this logic, a man is always a top. He goes on to say that this category leaves room for these men to engage sexual fluidity. He continues:

the Man identity in the gender system creates a space in the ballroom community for men who are sexually curious or fluid, are engaged in sex work, or fall in love with or attracted to a Butch Queen, Femme Queen, or woman. This allows them
to belong to the Ballroom community in some way without having to identify
with one of the more commonly claimed identities. (43)

The “Man” identity in the Detroit ballroom scene is an example of how many larger
hetoronormative ideals of masculinity inform Black gay life. It also shows us the nuanced ways
gender works in conversation with sexual identity and performance. Specifically, claiming a
Trade or Man identity/archetype often gives Black men leverage to move in and out of spaces
typically read as gay or straight.

A similar phenomenon is at play in McCune’s examination of “discrete” men in Chicago
clubs on “Alternative Lifestyles Night.” In chapter one, I described a moment from McCune’s
text where he has an interaction with Shawn at The Gate, where Shawn resisted a gay or sissy
label yet engaged in queer sexual performances. However, McCune also includes a narrative
about a “ladies man” named Tavares who accompanied him and his friend Dedrick to The Gate
one night. McCune and Dedrick took their straight male friend to the club. While dancing in the
hip-hop room, they lose him. The two then go look for Tavares and find him ogling the femme
queens in the house music and voguing room. When asked about it, he confesses to McCune that
he is into “femme cats,” an admission that surprises him considering that Black queens often
privilege a masculine or trade identity as ideal. McCune writes:

Here, Tavares gave value and recognition to a desire for something outside of the
masculine, showing a moment where his masculinity and heterosexuality were not
contingent upon his object choice being a masculine subject. (94)

According to McCune, Tavares goes on to use phrases such “so real” and “just like a woman” as
attributes he finds attractive, while still signaling acknowledgement that he is aware that they are
men or transwomen. McCune states, “Though he may relish the femininity of his sexual subject
object-choice, he is aware that it is ‘a dude” (94). McCune goes on to argue that Tavares’ attraction to femme queens make sense in a larger heteronormative frame.

McCune’s and Bailey’s narratives complicate the simple notion of trade or masculine men being the ideal in Black gay life. However, the stigma around femininity or effemiphobia is very real in Black culture and has a direct impact on sexual identities and performances. Critically engaging with discourses around sex and sexuality provides insight into how we understand ourselves and the world. Specifically, my engagement with pullin’ trade highlights how Black queer people create community and troubles static sexual orientations or misuses of literacy in regard to sexual identity, performance, and space.

I show how their understandings, like many of those in the Black LGBTQ community, are commonsense to them, even as they continue to baffle those outside these communities. The participants present their knowledge as a form of necessary disruption. As in chapters two and three, I build on Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetart’s understanding of literacy narratives as an ethnographic method to engage with individual and cultural identity, as well as rites of passage (647). I believe that calling attention to these men’s stories illuminates points of view and knowledges that may not otherwise be heard. My analysis is focused on two mandates that speak to how Black queer people refashion literacies around sexual orientation and gender performance: “Just because he’s straight doesn’t mean he won’t…” and “All tops aren’t masculine. All bottoms aren’t feminine.” The participants encourage the field to think about the multiple ways normative literacies around sexuality play a role in erasing the lived experiences and knowledges of Black queer people.
Pullin’ trade is an on the spot literacy, similar to reading and throwing shade, in the sense that it is not a static reading of people or situations but one informed by the material context. This section engages with how Black queer people understand or use the term trade. The participants define the term but also work to complicate heterosexuality and masculinity by telling truths about men based on knowledges and experiences specific to Black queer life. In previous chapters, I built on Pritchard’s concept of literacy normativity, which speaks to how customs and literacies specific to the West often have authority and are read as correct. An example of literacy normativity would be assuming that a man does not engage in sex with gay men or transwomen because they self-identify as a heterosexual.

The idea that heterosexuals are people who have sex with members of the opposite sex and that homosexuals are people who have sex with same sex erases the lived experiences and realities of self-identified straight men who have or continue to engage in sex with gay men and transwomen. This erasure potentially works to the benefit of men who want to keep that part of their lives a secret. Thus, definitional static understandings of sexual orientation that keep people from being able to see these realities contribute to literacy normativity. Specifically, the participants engage trade and masculinity to complicate the idea of a masculine gender performance signifying a heterosexual orientation or resistance to homosexual activity.

As a fierce literacy, the phrase “pullin’ trade” is playful and signifies off of the idea that there is a gravitational like pull some gay men and transwomen seem to have that makes straight men not so straight. The phrase also suggests that sexual identity is not static and is informed by
our experiences and the people we meet. In order to understand pullin’ trade as rites of passage, we have to understand the identity or designation of straight as not permanent or mutually exclusive when it comes to engaging in homosexual activity.

Johnson highlights “Do you get down?” as a phrase to signify about or procure about same sex desire. He writes, “This question is posed as a code between Black men who have sex with other men, but who do not identify as ‘gay,’ or men who have come to be called “Down-Low brothers” (Sweet Tea 256). I have heard this phrase circulated in the Black gay community to signify same sex desire without actually saying terms like gay or homosexual, which carry stigmas.

In the early 2000s, the phrase down low would come to describe Black men who have sex with men while performing heterosexual personas in other parts of their lives. The archetype of the “down low brotha,” an otherwise good Black man who has unprotected sex with men and women became the scapegoat for higher HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women. Formerly used to describe undercover sexual escapades of any kind, “On the Down Low” became a way to signify queer possibility and personal anguish in a “straight man.”

The Down Low gained mainstream attention through the 2004 publication of J.L. King’s On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of ‘Straight’ Black Men Who Sleep with Men and his subsequent appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show. This was followed by Terry McMillan’s appearance on the show in which she discussed her marriage to a down low man. In addition, E. Lynn Harris novels and countless DL storylines on shows like Girlfriends, Will & Grace and Law & Order SVU would play a role in cementing the DL in mainstream discourse. While works such as Keith Boykin’s 2005 book Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America and Jeffrey McCune’s 2014 Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of
Passing tease out the DL phenomena as not specific to just Black men and not proven responsible for escalating HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women, the DL man continues to be viewed as a social pariah in heterosexual life.

Trade is DL from the queer gaze. Some out gay men identify as trade, but most of the time, the term is used to talk about straight man who “will go.” However, it must be understood that the terms trade and DL overlap and many people use them interchangeably. For example, later on in this chapter, two of the participants Courtney and Victor discuss trade as contemporary and down low as outdated. Yet I want to be clear that trade should not be confused with bisexuality. One who self identifies as bisexual claims their queer or non-normative sexual identity. In contrast, trade as a designation speaks to Black gay men’s understanding of sexual identity as a performance and a journey. Trade, as a term and an identity, is projected onto men by gay men and transwomen. While down low represents sexual identity being hidden, trade speaks to an identity in flux. When the participants discuss trade, trade falls into two categories: men who identify as straight but dabble or have dabbled in queer sexual practices and gay men who purposely or consequently present as straight.

Joseph was one of the first participants I interviewed. He stuck out at the festival because he was wearing an Omega Psi Phi fraternity hat. In Black college and Greek life, members of this fraternity are often looked at as hyper-masculine. I have even gotten into arguments with members of the fraternity about whether or not they have gay members. For this reason alone, I would consider Joseph to be trade in my world. So, when I saw him being interviewed by a news crew at Harlem Pride, I knew I had to talk to him as well. I started the interview with the question, “What is trade?” Like many of the other participants, Joseph sees trade as tied to masculinity or at least a dissociation from femininity. He says: “Trade is intended to be those
brothers who were messing around with gay men but didn’t want to associate with us on a regular basis.” The common theme that connects every participant’s discussion of trade is that trade are straight masculine men who have sex with gay men and transwomen.

In the opening quotes of this chapter, Courtney, another participant, discusses trade as mysterious unicorns. He points to a sense of mystery or the unknown as central to his understanding of trade. He mentions several forms of trade including “Bum Trade” “Dirty Dick Trade” and “Regular Trade,” which suggests that there’s not one type of trade and that participants know it when they see it.

In Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano’s *The Joy of Gay Sex*, interactions with trade often reify heteronormative notions of masculinity equaling dominance and the idea of these men as straight:

Someone unquestionably straight is called *rough trade*. Hustlers are known as commercial trade. Both terms connote danger. Two constants emerge: He who is trade plays the straight role, and the sex is geared towards his climax, not to mutual orgasm. (287)

While I acknowledge that the authors’ description of trade is a little sensational, it points towards this larger fetishization of heterosexuality and masculine personas in the literal face of homosexual activity. I am particularly interested in “pullin trade” as a literacy— specifically as it relates to Black gay men’s relationship with the term and how it speaks to larger understandings of sexual identity and performance.

In a Black gay context, trade is used as a masculine signifier and as a term for sex work. In “Snap! Culture,” Johnson describes trade as “handsome and extremely masculine” (128). Both readings of trade speak to the idea of its performance of masculinity and perceived
heterosexuality as sexually enticing. However, trade’s mere presence in gay contexts like a gay club or a gay man’s bedroom complicate the idea of heterosexuality as a static identity or performance.

Even though all of my participants had similar thoughts on how trade is understood today, a couple of the participants discuss how the definition of trade has changed over time. For example, Harmonica states that the definition of trade has expanded and now she thinks people use it whenever they think necessary. Similar to shade, as described in chapter three, trade becomes a catchall for sexual attractiveness somewhat severed from its original meaning. Ashley told me that she heard the term more in her twenties (the 2000s) than she hears it today. She explains: “The term trade has slowed down from when I was younger and even in the last five years.”

Similar to Joseph, Courtney describes trade as masculine. “You might not even know if they’re gay but you look at them and be like ‘Oh, that’s trade.” In this statement, Courtney suggests that the man’s sexual orientation is unknown yet also suggests an ability to tell one’s propensity to engage queer sexual activity. Courtney is discussing an on the spot situated read of sexuality. He deliberately avoids static notions of masculinity like chopping wood or playing baseball and instead suggest that he reads masculinity and potential queerness in men intuitively.

Many people in the Black queer community also tie their understanding of trade back to early definitions of the term. Trade has also been used as a term to describe hustlers or male sex workers. For example, Ashley describes regular harassment that she received as a white transwoman from what Silverstein and Picano calls commercial trade:

When I walk down the street, I get accosted by (teenaged) young men of color looking for not just sex but money. To them their penis sells. They know they’re
young and will attract whatever crowd, and they don’t even think of it as gay or not gay. They just think money. Them too are considered trades because they’re hustlers. They’re just tricks of the trade.

In this scenario, masculinity is a commodity to be sold. Similar to previous comments, Ashley speaks about trade as masculine and suggests that trade do not see sex with men or transwomen as gay in and of it itself, nor do they believe that it signifies a gay sexual orientation. Instead, their focus is on the money that is being exchanged during the interaction. Exchanges like this are why the term trade can easily be connected to commerce. Joseph describes this exchange as, “Trade is exactly that. I’m willing to do such and such in exchange for…” Joseph calls attention to bartering as a part of pullin’ trade. These exchanges are not always about full on sexual intercourse for monetary rewards. Sometimes they are about bartering for food, shelter, acceptance and/or career advancement.

However, when I asked friends Victor and Courtney the difference between trade and DL, they state that they see trade as more current than DL:

Victor: I think DL is a played-out term.

Courtney: I also think DL is a played-out term, but I won’t negate that they exist. One trade might not necessary be gay, but if he is, it doesn’t mean he’s DL. He’s just not going around saying ‘Oh, I’m gay.” DL, they not telling nobody…

Courtney points to the overlap between down low and trade. Both identities help tease out that there are larger forces, including but not limited to sexual practices, at work that lead people to claim the sexual orientations they do. In such cases, engaging in same-sex sexual activity does not necessarily influence men to adopt public queer sexual identities.
To be clear, I do not offer trade as a term for academia or heterosexuals to use to describe these men who have gay sex. As a fierce literacy, I offer “pullin’ trade” as a way to engage with the complex ways that masculinity and sexual identity are read and performed. Pullin’ trade represents a larger sexual/gender literacy that demonstrates that masculinity or perceived heterosexuality are often read as sexual ideals. However, masculinity and sexual orientation are not read the same by every person in every context. The participants understand trade/pullin’ trade as a phrase specific to the Black queer community and experience.

Jason first saw the term used in Black Gay Yahoo chatrooms he navigated as a teenager. Even though she is white, Ashley sees trade as a Black gay term used to describe primarily Black and Latino people. However, she feels it is necessary to state that these men exist in white communities as well:

If you go to some neighborhoods in Louisiana or Minnesota where it is all white people, there are trades there… To them because they’re on the top scene and are the ones doing the screwing, they don’t consider it gay. It has become an urban terminology that I have learned in the Black community.

Ashley’s comments speak to the complexities of how literacies function. Ashley, Jason and the other participants see trade/pullin’ trade as a situated knowledge or as I have argued, a literacy specific to the Black queer community. However, one of the controversies of the Down Low media spectacle of the early 2000s was the suggestion that Black men were the only ones who were secretly sleeping with men while maintaining public relationships with women. While I acknowledge that men of color often feel more pressure to live up to arbitrary masculine benchmarks, Ashley’s acknowledgment of white trade is very important in understanding that trade (the people) exist everywhere.
Lastly, the notion of trade as subjective was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Several of the participants mention that their understanding of trade is individual and situated. Courtney mentions that he and his friends periodically disagree about who is trade. “One of my friends thinks another one of my friends is trade, and I’m like ‘that’s a lady.” Courtney’s comments suggest that there is not a common understanding of masculinity within the Black queer community. However, trade is still understood in contrast to a femme persona.

Similar to Courtney, Joseph disagrees with his gay-children—that is, the gay youth he mentors—about who is trade based on femininity. He suggests that our understanding of trade has evolved:

A lot of my kids, I look at the guys they find attractive and go [tilting his head]

Okay! Some of the guys that I know for a fact topped them, I look at them like…

[tilts head] Okay!

Joseph takes on a sarcastic tone to suggest that he questions his gay-children’s readings of their partners as trade. Since he sees these men as feminine, he concludes they are not trade. Trade is really about ambiguity. For this reason, anyone who is not obviously legible as gay is trade. The participants’ comments both acknowledge common and often institutionalized literacies about sexuality, while simultaneously speaking back to and rewriting these literacies to create space for their truths. Next, I will engage with how literacies about trade denaturalize the conflation of gender performance with sexual behavior.

*Mandate #2:*

“All tops aren’t masculine, and all bottoms aren’t feminine”

The most consistent theme in our discussions about trade was that most of the participants saw themselves speaking back to dominant scripts—or literacy normativity drawing on Pritchard’s
work – and attempting to correct dominant scripts about who masculine men are and what sexual practices they engage in based on larger Black queer communal knowledges. This section focuses on how fierce literacies of pullin’ trade speak back to normative ideas of sexual behavior tied to gender performance.

In his discussion of Black queer people and undesirability in digital spaces, Pritchard discusses how literacy normativity informs our ideas of what is sexually enticing:

Those holding normative standards of beauty, body, and gender attain more power within a public that places so much value and attention on physical appearance and normative masculinity and femininity. Accordingly, others are seen as having less value based on those same standards. Those notions reign over the social experiences of the everyday and permeate every facet of lived experience, including at work, at school, in families, among friends, and online. *(Fashioning Lives 195)*

These normative understandings of masculinity and femininity as diametrically opposed exist everywhere in the dominant culture. So, it makes sense that this informs how Black queer people see sexuality. However, my participants also speak back to and rewrite these literacies. They speak back to effemiphobia in Black gay culture and deconstruct sexual and gender identity as tied to behavior. Lastly, the participants discuss how men’s gender performances influence their sex appeal. While they were aware of larger readings of gender that render femininity as undesirable and masculinity as appealing, many of my participants went out of their way to tell stories and present scenarios that suggest that these static ways of understanding sexuality were not the norm in their community.
In a lot of ways, trade is defined in opposition to what is considered a butch queen or stereotypical gay man. Joseph states that there has always been a heteronormative gender division amongst Black queer people. He explains: “The girls were the girls and the boys were the boys. The trade were the boys, and the girls were the more feminine men.” Later on, I asked him if he thought trade or the privileging and fetishization of masculinity was a problem in the Black queer community. He explained that he does not see it as a negative thing but what he does have a problem with is the effemiphobia in the community:

It seems to be that the more effeminate men are looked down upon. They’re seen in a negative light. But like I always tell people, like people told me coming up, it was the more effeminate men (and transwomen) that started the Stonewall Riot. It was those people who were tired of being treated less than while the more masculine/trade-y guys [making air quotes] who wanted to fade into the background and let the police do the things that they were doing to us.

Here we see Joseph challenging dominant understandings of effeminate men, challenging the belief that effeminate men are weak. Joseph references the heroic effort of Black transwoman activist Marsha P. Johnson and others in starting the Stonewall Riots, which would lead to the creation of June Pride festivals everywhere including Harlem Pride. Specifically, her identity as a femme and a transwomen and many other queer people’s inability to blend in with heterosexual society leads them to the front lines to fight on behalf of the LGBTQ community.

Oreill uses a scenario that happened earlier that day at Harlem Pride as an example of how effemiphobia functions in the Black queer community.

During the parade, I was standing there with African American (gay) men and these two femme Black dudes walked by and one had on a crop top. The other
group was like ‘Eww! That’s so gross! Why can’t they just be men’ and I was like that is so messed up to argue that [based off what they are wearing]…

In this example, it is clear that even gay prides are not necessarily safe spaces for men to engage in femme gender performances. For the one group of men, femininity runs counter to what they see as acceptable in men. However, Oreill speaks back to this stance in his interview with me.

When I asked Harmonica if she felt trade had privilege in the Black queer community, she says they do “because we let them.” Harmonica discusses how gay men and transwomen will raincheck plans they have with their friends in order to hook up with trade:

Some people will cancel their plans with you because trade coming over. We been friends forever. You just met trade last night, but now you gonna cancel all plans cuz he’s coming over?

In this example, the opportunity to engage in sex with trade is literally privileged above the companionship of others. In contrast, Courtney and Victor immediately respond in unison. “I don’t think so.” I will be honest their answer originally flabbergasted me. As a Black gay man, who is often read as femme, I have a lifetime of experience that suggests how masculinity has privilege in the larger world and in the Black gay community. However, Victor and Courtney helped me to not see masculinity and privilege as flat or static. Courtney continues to explain why he said masculinity is not necessarily privileged: “Because I’ve heard people say ‘All trade do is mess up your credits and leave you with two kids.’” In this example, Courtney signifies off static gender norms when he embodies a femme or woman ethos to evoke “the ain’t shit nigga” trope to describe trade as your typical triflin’ ain’t no good man. In this way, trade are read as masculine and are categorized with straight men and placed in hierarchy lower than gay men.
While their sex appeal tied to masculinity makes these men desired in the club or bedroom, Courtney’s comments suggest they are problematic outside of that.

In Black queer communities and mainstream discourses, it is commonly assumed that men and or the masculine partner (as if there is always only one) is often the top, the giver or the dom(inant), while the woman or femme partner (as if there is always only one) is often the bottom, the receiver or the sub(missive). People who are sexually versatile or switch are often erased from discourse and literacies about sexuality. Sexual dynamics are not static in heteronormative or Black queer contexts. One of the most commonsense truths or literacies that circulate about trade is that they are good looking tops and are good in bed. However, Courtney and Victor both state that trade do not have to be attractive. Courtney goes on to say, “When you think of trade, you think of someone who has a good stroke game.” Courtney’s comments demonstrate that literacies about trade are steeped in pornographic fantasy.

Specifically, the idea that trade is ideally a top is as recurrent as the idea that he should be masculine. I asked Courtney and Victor if trade could be a bottom. They both hesitate and Courtney says yes. Then Victor responds, “I feel like after you find out the person’s a bottom, they’re no longer trade.” They both laugh. Similar to Courtney’s comments about trade being good in bed, Victor makes it clear that he sees trade as tops ideally. Again, the fantasy of trade as straight masculine tops with good dick is clear. Both of their comments reflect common beliefs about masculine gender performance tied to topping as a sexual behavior and identity.

Joseph and Ashley acknowledge these beliefs but engage in a rewriting of literacy by speaking back to these ideas. The old adage that you cannot judge a book by its cover informs their sexual literacies. Joseph states that what you see in the street in not necessarily what is going on behind closed doors. He states that when it comes to how sexual partners determine
who is topping versus bottoming, it is more of a “one-to-one negotiation.” Specifically, he discusses how the sexual practices of “metrosexuals” or heterosexual dandy-like men who are more cognizant of their appearances demonstrate that effeminacy does not necessarily signify an interest in practicing or identifying as a bottom.

Once upon a time, you immediately assume that those people aren’t trade. (Yet) They’ll turn around and they’ll pull out a package and be like BONG! [gestures] …and they’ll expect you to get down on that and a lot of guys do. I’ve seen a lot of guys who are very pretty and will tell you in a minute that they will climb on your back and have no problem addressing that and there are guys who like that as well.

Ashley echoes Joseph sentiments saying that she knows really masculine men that are bottoms and very feminine men who “will tear your butt up when the lights go out.” Joseph and Ashley engage in graphic sexual imagery to transport the listener to the actual scenario. They essentially tell mini-narrative/scenarios to denaturalize commonsense static understanding trade as tops.

Lastly, many of my participants work to destabilize the notion of masculinity as desirable. Joseph uses his attraction to his effeminate partner to suggest that not all Black queer people want masculine men:

I love him for that. Everything about him and what I love is that he is a lot softer and he’s a lot meeker but make no mistake like any other man he’s always there for me and he had my back when I needed him.

Joseph essentializes meekness and softness as feminine and loyalty and support as masculine attributes he appreciates in his partner. While he engages in traditional readings of gender to
describe the attributes themselves, he creates a gray space for his partner that transcends his gender.

I asked Courtney and Victor if they were primarily attracted to trade and both were resistant to say yes flatly. Specifically, Courtney discusses liking men who are both masculine and feminine. “I’m attracted to butch queens preferably. Someone who walks on the fence. They not too masculine. They not too femme. They can adapt to any situation.” Courtney confesses a desire for a partner who can both be comfortable at a gay club on a Saturday night and church on Sunday morning. I then kid, “Versatile, if you will,” alluding to the sexual position. Courtney and Victor laugh. Victor goes on to say that he is not really attracted to gender or sexual archetypes. “I think it depends on the person. I wouldn’t say I like a certain type of person. It depends.” Victor’s comments speak to the core ideas behind pullin’ trade as a literacy.

While Victor and my other participants acknowledge the role that normative sexual literacies of gender performance and sexual orientation play in constructing the social world around them, they also look beyond, speak back to and rewrite their own sexual literacies for a new generation of Black queer people.

**Telling Their Truths**

In conclusion, the participants rewrite sexual literacies in order to narrate their experiences and to speak to commonsense truths in the Black queer community. These truths work to disrupt heteronormative sexual literacies that circulate in the Black queer community and mainstream culture.

Ashley often referenced escalating HIV and STD rates tied to promiscuity as a reason to tell her truths. Joseph described his and his partner’s roles as gay-parents as part of the reason he
is in a position to impart knowledge about how it really is. All of the participants seemed committed to speaking back to commonly believed untruths about sexuality specific to Black queer people. The participants demonstrate that being able to read another person’s truth or interest, which may run counter to the heterosexual or the masculine personas they present, is a type of specialized knowledge—a literacy. Fierce literacies are about sharing truths and experiences in an effort to correct misconceptions about sexuality. This awareness does not come from reading queer theory or watching a film but from practicing and listening to stories about pullin’ trade and throwing shade.

My examination of trade is not designed to simply understand that some straight men are actually gay. My focus is more on a communal knowledge than an individual sexual orientation or identity. Literacies about trade reveal the ways that normative understandings of sexuality often erase a discussion of sexual practices that do not fit neatly into orientations such as gay, straight, and/or bisexual. This examination of pullin’ trade as a larger fierce literacy reveals how normative understandings of sexual orientation play a role in maintaining heteronormativity and queer erasure.

As my interviews have shown, trade as a gender performance is not so much about looking like a literal straight person as much as a straight archetype or fantasy. Trade is deliberately singular (even though it is talking about both a singular person and a collective) because it pejoratively speaks to “how they (collectively) be.” It is a riff off of the idea that all heterosexual men act and think alike. Even as we know that literacy is situational, we also know that static performances operate in powerful ways across institutions and communities.

For example, as I shown in chapter two, in my discussion of Paris, one of the scenes that the performers participate in is the realness scene. In this scene, they compete to perform their
best versions of straight men and women. Dorian states that it is “not a takeoff or satire” but based on the ability “to blend” in with heterosexual society. In the ballroom scene where everyone in the room is queer, realness is authenticated through a believable gender performance. Because gay and trans people are often mistreated by the dominant society, it makes sense that they would want to blend.

In the next chapter, I focus more explicitly on my experiences as a Black queer academic teaching writing intensive courses with a particular attention to gender, sexuality, and pop culture. Throughout this dissertation, I have strived to read Black queer people on their own terms. Rather than seeing their practices as a deficit or lacking or a mistake, I show how such practices acknowledge and defy literacy normativity. I can see no way better way to conclude this dissertation than to show my own experiences working with fierce literacies.
CHAPTER 5
Fierce Pedagogies

“I am a voice in this world and I deserve to be heard.”
—Professor Jordan “If I Should Die Before I Wake,” A Different World

“I am a man of my times. My times just don’t know it.” —Bayard Rustin

The question that I am often asked is how is this knowledge—represented in stories—literacies. What this study reminds us is that literacy is more than traditional alphabetic reading and writing. It is quite simply about reading the world—and about rereading it against static understandings. Jonathan Alexander argues compositionists should be concerned how students critically think through the ways we understand sex, sexuality, and the information, seeing such reflection as being central to how one understands oneself and our place in the world. He writes:

In terms of education, it is becoming increasingly apparent that how one learns about sex and sexuality in this culture is complexly wrapped up in notions of citizenship; put another way, how one develops a literacy about sexuality is crucial to one’s understanding of important public debates, and hence participation in the democratic project. (Literacy 4)

The stories we tell about sexuality, as Alexander notes, are often central to how we know each other and ourselves. Part of how we keep our student engaged in these public discussions and debates is by having them engage with popular culture texts that are widely circulated.
This work also yields insight for individuals who work with cultural and/or sexual literacies in their various classrooms—from communication and rhetoric to composition to women and gender studies. It speaks to how stigmas and normative literacies around race, gender, sexuality and sexual performance keep these discussions outside of the classroom and contribute to the erasure of queer people and experiences. In this chapter, I will focus on how this discussion of Black queer literacies inform the work we do as teachers in the classroom.

How do we encourage students to be self-reflective in their discussions and written work? How do we encourage them to participate in academic and popular discourses? How do we get students to explore the messiness of sexual literacies? To answer all these questions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the first step is interrogating how we know what we know about sexuality. In this chapter, I engage with three teachable moments or literacy narratives. I use these narratives to illustrate how discussing sexual and cultural literacies is not safe work. I focus on three stories that involve three men—Barack Obama, Frank Ocean, and Donald Trump—two who self-identify as straight, two who identify as African American. I mention these accounts because they caught me off guard in the classroom and exposed the messiness of how sexual literacies around identity and performance function. A discussion of Obama led to a student calling me out, a discussion of Frank Ocean forced me to come out, and a discussion of Donald Trump led to my bowing out. My identity as a gay man was always in the room. A central argument of this chapter and the dissertation more broadly is that we need to recognize how literacy normativity functions and really limits understandings of sexuality. As a Black queer teacher, I encounter these challenges every day because of the body and identity I inhabit.
Before turning to my accounts, I offer a brief review of how a range of scholars have engaged with being read as Black and or queer and how they have worked toward creating a curriculum that is Black queer inclusive.

Teaching Queer While Reading Queer

The 2013 HBO documentary *The Out List* featured out queer people discussing how their sexuality has informed their material lives. Sex education teacher Wazina Zondon’s comments left a big impression on me. She stated that when queer teachers are out and open in the classroom, it gives students “more options” of what they can be. The statement left an impression because I am open about my sexuality in the classroom and bring a lot of my life into the discussion. Zondon’s comments and these scholars work makes me ask “How does being an out Black gay man inform what goes on in the classroom, especially in a society that regularly shames and oppresses these identities?” Within the field of composition, as I have described throughout this dissertation, scholars have engaged with the material lives of LGBTQ students and how they compose (e.g., Malinowitz; Pritchard “For Colored Kids”). Here, I will engage with scholarship where critical thinking is taught using pop culture texts that are read as queer. These intellectuals, from a variety of disciplines, use pop culture texts to encourage students to think about how gender and sexuality are constructed in their writing, communication, and after school classrooms. Their research makes it clear that when we enter their classroom, we present bodies that are raced, gendered, and sexualized. These parts of us cannot be ignored and should instead be used to inform the discussion and encourage students to recognize the messiness or unsure moments in thinking through these often times sensitive concepts.
In “Telling the Truth about Sex: Rhetorical Responsiveness in the Case of Ted Haggard,” Jonathan Alexander uses his experience teaching an English course entitled “Writing Sex.” In it, students analyzed popular media discourses about sex over the last hundred years. Specifically, Alexander recalls a classroom discussion about televangelist Ted Haggard, who was outed after it was found out that he regularly visited a male escort. At the end of the discussion, one of his students asks, “Ok, really, isn’t Haggard really just gay? I mean, c’mon, just tell us he’s really gay.” Alexander writes,

I took a deep breath and said, “No, I can’t say that. I can’t say that I think he’s really gay. I’m not sure he is. Moreover, I’m not sure I have the right to speak on behalf of someone else’s sexual truth.” Many students in this class of 90 immediately raised their voices to protest. (105)

This example speaks to the ways that queerness is read onto professors. While Alexander attempted to have a discussion about Haggard from an objective space, his students nevertheless could not resist treating him as a gay man and expecting him to use his “gaydar” to resolve their uneasiness toward Haggard’s sexual identity. The students’ attempted to use what they perceive as Alexander’s static homosexual identity and knowledge to understand Haggard but are instead exposed to the messiness of sexual identity and performance. In the remainder of Alexander’s piece, he speaks to how the media discourse around Haggard speaks to larger norms around sexuality and how students can be more critically responsive to the rhetorical power of narratives about sexuality (109).

In a similar way, education scholar Bettina Love’s work engages with how students read queer bodies and how that often creates a space of messiness and can lead to questions. Unlike Alexander, Love works with Black girls in Atlanta’s Hope Community Center and is an out
lesbian. However, Love’s anxiety around being read as sexually queer caused a barrier between her and the girls. In *Hip Hop Li’l Sistas Speak*, Love reimagines hip hop pedagogy for urban youth exploring their identity, in relationship to race, class, and body image. Love discusses a scene where she was chatting with some of the girls. One of the girls, Lara, looks down at Love’s wedding ring and frankly asks “Coach T, you gay? She becomes tongue-tied and responds coyly telling them to mind their business. She states that she is typically out of the closet, but misconceptions about homosexuals as sexual predators and homophobia in the church influenced her to be tight lipped. Love goes on to look at her field notes and reflect on her relationship with the girls. She was forced to admit that larger misconceptions about her sexuality made her uncomfortable asking Black girls about how they viewed their bodies. She also realized that her insecurities and inability to discuss matters related to the body silenced the girls. Only after she began to interview the girls, did she get to better understand them. In their comments, Love found that the girls wanted to talk about queer issues and had very progressive views on LGBTQ people and rights (62). She came to realize that not being out with the girls was a missed opportunity that limited real dialogue. She writes:

> By hiding, I missed opportunities to re-narrate my closeted performance at HCC and engage in dialogue with fearless, open-minded young women. In retrospect, this learning experiences was more my loss than theirs. After the girls created a space for me to research, my relationship with them was much more fluid. (64)

Due to homophobia and her own insecurities, Love misread the girls and cut off parts of herself to engage with them. Once she was honest with them, however, she found that it was easier to connect.
Similar to Love, Bryant Keith Alexander uses moments of uneasiness in the classroom to speak to how Black gay instructors are read by their students. In “Embracing the Teachable Moment,” Alexander theorizes on the presence of a Black gay male instructor in a class entitled the Oral Interpretation of Literature and Performing Culture, which encourage students to critically think about writing and culture. The class is not explicitly about Queer issues yet they nevertheless enter the classroom. Alexander’s thoughts echo Zodon’s ideas about how a queer teacher reveals possibility in the lives and minds of their students. Alexander writes that Black queer bodies in particular have specific histories that we bring in with us thanks to Black and queer people’s relationship with white supremacy and homophobia. He writes:

Our bodies are always already racially historicized, sexualized, physicalized, and demonized. In the classroom our presence is always already a disruption to the norms of our social construction. Talking about and presenting ourselves in the classroom as gay merely further illuminates the complexity of our character and the possibility of our beings. (250).

Because of larger forces of homophobia and racism, many Black and queer professors often feel that they have to cut off parts of themselves in order to teach. This becomes even more complicated when attempting to teach about issues of race, gender, and/or sexuality. Specifically, Alexander discusses using texts surrounding California’s proposed Proposition 22 Ban on gay marriage and a piece on gay hate crimes that was featured on the last page of the Los Angeles Times as examples that draw on larger sexual or queer issues. He goes on to say that being read as an out gay man by his students often put him in the position to speak back to homophobic comments from students. His legibility as a gay man is not specific to the work that he does in
the classroom but it does inform it. He discusses how his larger campus ethos plays a role in how his students read his sexuality.

Alexander offers an example of a student’s presentation, where his identity as a black gay man informed his read of the situation and engagement with the student. He assigned an analysis paper and prose performance about gender. One of his students, who happened to be gay, performed a drag interpretation of an excerpt from Meryl Cohn’s camp etiquette book *Do What I Say: Ms. Behavior’s Guide to Gay and Lesbian Etiquette*. After the performance, the students engaged in a discussion about gender. He found that the women in the class seemed to confirm his performances of gender. They began to share stories, to connect in part with Ms. Behavior—recognizing that they are “same and not the same” (257). In this example, the student’s performance of the Ms. Behavior’s drag character created a space for them, specifically the women, to engage with and reflect on their body histories and relationships with gender. Some of the students go on to speak about how funny the performance was as a spectacle, however, and miss the gender element. Alexander intervenes and asks, “How does Ms. Behavior’s performance inform us?” He explains how Ms. Behavior placed his body on the border of what it means to be performatively man versus woman and works to denaturalize the everyday-ness of gender. The performance also encourages us to think about how we as teachers are trapped in the spectatorial gaze of our students (258). He then begins to reflect on the implication of his stepping into the conversation as a Black gay male instructor.

Somewhere between my comments on the performance and my clarification of the issues, lies the me and the not me. The black gay man in me has challenged the impression of the “straight” teacher and the sanitized nature of classroom
discourse around issues of race, sex, sexuality, and gender that had so often signaled my classroom experience as a student. (259)

Alexander’s comments speak to some of the messiness that comes to the table when critically engaging with students about sexuality and gender. He discusses his response in a letter to a student, who suggested he had a “homosexual agenda during the Ms. Behavior discussion. He writes:

So my comments related to Ms. Behavior are not designed to promote a ‘homosexual agenda’ but rather a critical examination of the performance as it met the assignment and the accompanying social critique it offered on the construction of gender. (260)

In his letter, he explained the comments he made in class. He wanted the student to understand why he felt that he need to ask this question—that this was not about promoting a “homosexual agenda” but coming to terms with how sexuality functions. In doing this, he speaks back to the anxiety people often have when confronted with provocative discourse around gender and sexuality. This is often complicated when the instructor is read as queer. However, Alexander encourages us as scholars to not see Blackness or queerness as otherness but rather possibility. These scholars show us that queer bodies and perspectives help them to connect with students and create a space for them to critically engage with how gender and sexuality are understood.

Queerness, Pedagogy, and Visibility

I often tell people that I used to teach in slacks and bow ties when I first started. Coming from an Historically Black University, it was a part of the culture that bougie dudes wore bowties when they dressed up, and my father said it was necessary to distinguish me from my students because
I looked similar to them and was only a couple of years older. However, it soon became clear to me that my clothes were not going to make me look older, richer, whiter or more heterosexual. After a couple of years teaching, it occurred to me that I was visible. It was clear that my students saw my youth, Blackness, and queerness.

Whether it was through the pop culture I brought in or my attitude, sense of humor, or mannerisms, they saw me. The ways they danced around issues of race and sexuality when they talked to me suggested it. I realized that no matter what I wore, it was not gonna keep the white boy hip hop head from asking me what I thought of the new Kanye album in the middle of class. Soon I started dressing in my normal clothes: boots, jeans and v-necks and started to be honest when my students asked me what I thought about pop culture texts rather than trying to funnel it through what is often considered an objective, 57-year-old white heterosexual male perspective. I argue that the teaching moments included in this chapter function as fierce pedagogy literacy narratives. In each of these narratives, my students are working with pop culture texts that demonstrate the messiness of sexuality. Specifically, there are several moments of pushback from students, where they signify or riff off normative notions sexuality in jest in order to bring attention to alternative readings of the texts. In addition, racism and homophobia encourage many Black and/or Queer people to play down these aspects of their identity while at work. However, the legibility of these aspects of my identity creates a space for students to feel comfortable expressing their ideas and questioning their experience.

When I introduce myself to students, sharing where I come from and my educational history, I do not officially come out to them. Nor do I announce my Blackness on the first day of class, but it along with my queerness inevitably comes up when we are discussing race, gender, and sexuality in popular culture. I often use myself as an example to engage with intersectional
theory. For example, I might engage with the way my queerness colors my experience as a Black man and vice versa. Sometimes it comes up as I explain my relationship or response to specific texts or how they inform my life or the people around me. In the narrative examples that follow, I offer examples of how my identity keeps returning to the story.

Barack Obama: Calling Out

In the spring of 2015, I taught a critical research and inquiry course that was focused on the topic of race and gender in popular culture. The course encouraged students to practice the rhetorical strategies and dimension of composing in academic contexts. This writing intensive course was guided by four main writing assignments (a source portfolio, source analysis essay, synthesis essay and translation project) that encourage students to critically engage with sources, and then synthesize and translate ideas. It was also guided by a collection of shared readings that encouraged students to examine how race and gender are represented in the media.

I had already taught the course several times. So, I was not nervous. I had had good experiences engaging with students about controversial issues. I recall one day when the class was working with Vershawn Young’s article “Straight Black Queer: Obama, Code-Switching, and the Gender Anxiety of African American Men.” I picked the article because I believed it would help us think through the ways race informs how we read and understand language, literacy, and sexuality. Before coming to class, students read the article and wrote a critical summary of the work for their portfolio.

In this article, Young engages with criticisms of President Obama’s discourse in the Globe and the Washington Post. Young argues that writers often assign a “deceitful, nonnormative sexuality” to Obama in their critiques of his use of standard American English and
mannerisms. He uses Obama as an example to critique the teaching of code switching to Black students because it subordinates Black language and often makes Black males caught in a problematic position of having to appropriate standard American English and in turn be read as queer. While I feel that his notion of AAVE as straight and Standard American as gay for Black males lacks nuance especially where Black gay people are concerned, I do feel like he does a good job of encouraging students to think critically about the ways sexuality is read.

I opened the discussion by asking the students what they thought of the piece. After a brief pause, one student asks, “I’ve never heard anyone say Obama was gay.” Then many of the students responded that they had not heard that either. I then asked my students to go back to the text and tell me what were the main points that Young was trying to make with the article. While they were able to speak to Young’s discussion of Obama, their understanding of his engagement with AAVE as a masculine signifier was muddled. I tried to express in the most concise way possible that men of color do not have the same access to power (education, money, means of production) as white men do. For that reason, power is often understood through masculinity or one’s ability to keep himself and the ones around him safe. In turn, school and academics are often read as soft or at least not profitable. Then there is also the racism that many men of color face inside the classroom and at the university more broadly as has been discussed by Kirkland, Smitherman, and many others. This explanation morphed into me telling the students all the ways I would complicate Young’s piece, as I discussed the first chapter.

I then asked students about what sources and evidence Young used to support his claims. Some of the students critiqued the use of the Globe, a tabloid, to make such claims about Obama. Then a male student raised his hand and asked, “But do you think Obama is gay?” Seeing that I read Alexander’s piece about Ted Haggard previously, I should have seen the question coming,
but I actually had never actually sat down and thought about the question seriously. So, I attempted to go the safe route and responded with another question: “Does it matter? Is Obama’s sexual orientation relevant if this is about people’s reading of his discourse?”

A couple my students agreed and cosigned that it was not relevant. However, almost like he knew I going to have to write this dissertation one day, he asked “No, for real Seth. Do you think he’s gay?” In his repetition of the question, he wanted it to be clear that he knew that I was trying not to answer the question. He signified that I knew something that I was not letting on. He wanted me to get real and continued, “My father was at Harvard at the same time Obama was there, and he said it was common knowledge that he was gay.” I stood shocked for a second because I did not know how to respond. I discussed how in politics, it would not be surprising at all to see a relationship based on convenience. I told them that a good deal of the Black men I knew with advanced degrees dabbled in homosexual activity but kept up a heterosexual identity. However, I concluded that I found it hard to believe that Obama could keep such a secret if it were true in these digital, social mediated times. I ended the class by asking students to critically think through what would be at stake in such a revelation, especially considering that Obama is America’s first Black president. After class, the student came up to apologize for pushing the point. Similar to the discussion of trade in chapter four, the larger critical thinking that I attempted to model out for the students in response to the question about Obama’s sexuality is an example of fierce literacy pedagogy. There were many factors at play. And sexual orientations (gay, straight, bi, pan) often do not speak to the totality and reality of human sexuality.

This story stuck with me for several reasons. Later that year, I would have a conversation with my straight fraternity brothers where they assured me that there was no way in hell Obama was gay. These same brothers had never met Obama and didn’t even know that some other
brothers at the same table messed around with men. I realized they had no idea and were merely
going by static ideas of masculinity, emboldened by Obama’s actual power and credentials.

This story made me reflect on why I was originally reluctant to answer my student’s
question about Obama’s sexuality. The issue was not whether or not I thought Obama was gay,
but rather what the possibility of his being gay might mean for our first Black president. Put
another way, Black people and others are protective of Obama and many would see me calling
him gay as being an attack. As I discussed earlier in the dissertation, too often being read a queer
is discussed by Black men as being a worst thing. Obama essentially could not be gay for the
same reason a college professor could not be. I realized that the desire for him to be straight only
reified the stigma of being gay. The student calling me out led me to reflect on my life and
knowledges. In the next section, I describe another scenario about a celebrity coming out.

*Frank Ocean: Coming Out*

Early on the morning of July 4th, 2012, R&B artist Frank Ocean posted an open letter on his
tumblr, where he confessed that his first love was a man. In the piece, Ocean tells his narrative
about his love for a straight friend of his.

4 summers ago, I met somebody. I was 19 years old. He was too. We spent that
summer, and the summer after, together. Everyday almost. And on the days we
were together, time would glide. Most of the day I’d see him, and his smile. I’d
hear his conversation and his silence…until it was time to sleep. Sleep I would
often share with him. By the time I realized I was in love, it was malignant. It was
hopeless. There was no escaping.
He pens the narrative of unrequited love in order to free himself, which is why the letter being posted on Independence Day can be read poignantly and metaphorically. He writes, “I don’t know what happens now, and that’s alright. I don’t have any secrets I need kept anymore. There’s probably some small shit still, but you know what I mean.”

I first read the now iconic piece almost immediately after Ocean posted it. Popular urban blogger Kid Fury tweeted a link to the post without any remarks, which was the first clue that something serious was going on. I read the whole post in one glance. As a Black queer scholar, I knew that this was big deal because we have all, especially since the onset of hip-hop culture, been hypothesizing about what the first fully out Black gay male mainstream musician would look like or the likelihood that he would be successful. As a 23-year-old gay Black male at the time, I was immediately touched. Even though, I was already out of the closet, Frank Ocean showed me that it was okay to just be and that there is someone I can just be with. At the end of his post, Ocean sends a special thank you to his mother for her support. “Thanks, to my Mother. You raised me strong. I know I’m only brave because you were first. So thank you.” I spent the rest of the night tweeting about it. Since the debut of Channel Orange, Ocean has won several awards for his music and his influence and has since released the mixtape Endless and the album/visual album Blonde. I mention this to show how his coming out in some ways bolstered his popularity.

In summer of 2013, I taught an advanced research writing course with an earlier version of the same gender and race inquiry as the Obama discussion earlier in this article. This was a year after Ocean’s announcement. By this time, Ocean was a full on media darling with support from celebrities like Beyoncé and Jay Z and was featured on albums from Andre 3000 of Outkast. Most of my students knew exactly who Frank Ocean was. Those who did not became
acquainted with him through the reading for that day. For homework before class, they read and
annotated journalist Rod McCullum’s article “Game Changer: Why Frank Ocean’s coming out is
more significant than Anderson Cooper’s” for their source portfolio. In the piece, McCullum
engages with why Frank Ocean’s coming out as a Black man in the hip hop industry is
significant. Using interviews from DJ Baker, Daryl Stephens of Noah’s Arc and yours truly Seth
E. Davis, McCullum examined how the norms Ocean confronts as a Black man at the beginning
of his career compares with that of a seasoned journalist who is a Vanderbilt.

In addition to reading the piece, I had the students read his coming out post and watch
Ocean’s “Pyramids” music video at the beginning of class. Similar to how I taught the class
mentioned earlier, I asked students what was the main idea of McCullum’s article, which they
were able to articulate. The title gave them a head start. I asked them what materials and
evidence did McCullum use in order to build his claims. They cited the interview and the larger
logic that he uses to compare two cases. One student pushed back against the McCullum’s
comparison of the two because was it essentially unfair to directly compare two totally different
celebrities, which I agreed. However, I continued to challenge her and the class by reminding
them that the article is mostly about Ocean, that he and Anderson came out within a short time of
each other, and that McCullum only references him at the beginning to suggest that Cooper was
living in a “glass closet” because his sexuality was not really a secret.

We then moved to analyze Ocean’s post itself. I asked students why they thought he
chose a tumblr post as a genre and they spoke to the intimacy and immediacy of the message as a
reason. I asked them what was we he trying to say with the post. One male student raised his
hand and said, “He’s saying he’s gay.” I asked, “Is that really what he said?” Some students
shook their heads no and other looked back at post on their laptops. Then another student raised
their hand and said “No, he just said he was in love with a dude. He didn’t come out as gay.”

They then point to a line where Frank discusses sleeping with his friend, but they ultimately concluded that this does not mean they necessarily had sex.

I then asked the student why Ocean shared that experience and what was the point of the post. They went on to discuss how they thought he did it to free himself. Others thought it was publicity stunt. Most agreed his story humanized him and allowed them to see how gay relationships work in similar ways to straight ones. A couple of students spoke to the turmoil that Ocean had to go through as he was rejected by his friend and left waiting in the car as his friend went upstairs to be with his girlfriend. After a brief moment of “that’s fucked up” passes over the class, my one Black female student, who I also happened to be friends with outside of class, raised her hand and said, “I don’t have no sympathy for Frank. He over there sittin’ in the car tryin to take that girl’s man while she’s upstairs!” I immediately burst out laughing uncontrollably for two reasons. First, I could not believe she actually said that. Secondly, she was absolutely right, and I had totally missed that angle.

Our conversation about Frank Ocean helped us as a class to consider the ways sexuality and sexual performance function in our culture. Specifically, we were able to discuss how literacies about coming out often frame it as a one and done performance of liberation. However, coming out is something that is often done multiple times for multiple audiences and the ramifications are rarely the same. These moments often cause other people to be self-reflective and question what they know about sexuality. We were able to discuss how race and sexuality intersect to make Frank Ocean’s relationship to queerness as related but different from Anderson Cooper’s. Whereas the class was largely sympathetic to Ocean’s post, this student helped us see it another way. There was a woman in the story that likely understood her boyfriend as straight
even though he had a romantic relationship with Ocean. In this moment of messiness, we are able to see sexuality as performed separate from how one identifies, both in Ocean and his friend. The students were able to engage with how the sexual identities of these men were in flux and analyze texts from multiple perspectives. As fierce literacy narratives, Ocean’s narratives around coming out, as well as my own, signify that sexuality does not always function in static or tidy orientations, as many people would think. These narratives also demonstrate how pop culture texts help us to examine how sexual literacies are circulated and reproduced.
In fall of 2016, I taught two-discussion sections of Introduction to Women and Gender studies, which familiarizes students with the study of women, gender, and sexualities throughout the world. The professor taught the main lecture sessions and the other TAs and I lead our respective discussion sections. In this course, I often found myself having to bring more to the table to explain concepts. As opposed to my sexuality being casually mentioned in my writing courses, my Black and gay identity was central to my understanding of intersectional feminism, gender, and sexuality. By midterms, the emotional labor of the course began wear me down. While teaching writing courses, I could not help but engage race, gender and sexuality into the conversation. However in teaching WGS, the conversation would begin there. Controversial issues such as patriarchy, colonialism, and rape were also central to class discussions.

I had been nervous about the rape discussion all semester because it is such a personal issue for many people and a pertinent issue on college campuses. Also as the only male WGS TA teaching WGS for the first time, I was totally out of my comfort zone. Due to the professor and the other TAs having to travel for a conference, we missed the last week’s lecture. In the previous week, real estate millionaire and mogul Donald Trump shocked the world and was elected the 45th president of the United States. For many people who do social justice and liberation work, this was tragic blow. During the campaign cycle, Trump, who lacked any political experience, made comments referring to Mexican as rapists, suggesting women should be grabbed by their genitals and openly mocked a reporter with a disability. Many thought such comments would disqualify him from the position, but he still won the Electoral College vote despite losing the popular vote.
Shock and sadness poured from all over social media as many people tried to figure out what happened and what the next steps should be. While I was not surprised that America would elect a candidate that would spew racist, sexist, and ablest rhetoric, I was more disappointed and exhausted. In a lot of ways, Trump’s election hit a lot of us feminists where we are sore. What I mean is while most of us teach and preach about racism and sexism every day, it is rare that we see it on such blatant large scale. For me, his election was the confirmation about white supremacy that I did not need. The professor forwarded our students the “Pledge to our students” that Chandra Mohanty, the chair of SU’s department of Women and Gender Studies, wrote. In the letter, the department affirms the presence of its students in relation to the recent elections. It states,

To all of our students, we want you to know that we are resolute in our love and support of you. We express our support especially to those students who belong to historically marginalized communities, students of color, LBGTIQ+ students, disabled students, religious minority students, undocumented students and sexual assault survivors.

The department acknowledged that the last couple of weeks of the elections left these communities specifically vulnerable. They go on to say that they validate the lives and experiences of these groups and vow to fight against all forms or oppression. The email also went on to state that the department’s door is open. Moves like this by academic departments are very important. Departments are at the mercy of the larger institution in many ways. The pledge to stand beside students in the face of the university is very important and cannot be over looked.

During our weekly TA meeting on the following Monday, we discussed the results of the election and we all were very numb and felt like the results made our work that much more real,
if not too real. The professor asked us if we had anything planned for our discussion sections on
Wednesday and none of us had thought of anything yet because of the impact of the results. This
was the week that we were scheduled to talk about rape and gendered violence. However,
Trump’s history of rape allegations and his disturbing speech about women created an irony that
was not lost on us. She told us what she planned to talk about in lecture and said we were free to
handle the discussion section how we saw fit. She specifically cautioned us and encouraged us to
practice self-care because all of this hit so close to home for everyone.

The professor started her lecture with a speech that reiterated some of the points of the
pledge. Through her PowerPoint, she teased out some of the ways that misogyny informs why
women and femme bodies are often the targets of violence. She also worked with some of the
readings for the day, including excerpts from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins:
Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” and Rebecca Solnit’s
“A Rape a Minute, a Thousand Corpses a Year’: A Letter to Brock Allen Turner.”

By the time Wednesday came around, I still was not sure what I was going to do for
lecture. I had read and annotated the readings for the week. However, I still felt uneasy. The
election results left me somewhere between “that’s a shame” and “that’s how it always is.” I also
felt no more comfortable discussing rape with college students under current circumstances. I
walked into class of mostly white students and everybody seemed pretty down. So I gave them a
few minutes to discuss how they felt. The words mimicked the same shock that I had seen in
social media and in my friends. So I decided to trust my body and go with it. I summarized the
reading for the day. I told them that talking about rape makes me very uncomfortable as a man
teaching this course for the first time during these times. Informed by the readings, I went off
script and talked for about 10 minutes about rape culture and how this larger hatred of women
informed the ways we speak, dress, and talk about sex and sexuality. I discussed Trump’s
election as being connected to this larger institutional gendered understanding of how bodies are
read and treated in our society. I then previewed the reading for the next week and let them go.

I told my students why I let them go. I let them go early because I was emotionally
exhausted and being a “good” feminist TA was too hard to do on this particular day. My students
knew who I was, where I was from, and how this feminist work had shaped my politics. There
was no need to pretend to be someone I was not. I did not have all the answers or many answers
for that matter. I was temporarily lost and hurt because I had multiple the identities that were left
vulnerable over the last couple of weeks. I let my heart speak informed by my experience, the
readings, and my training in women and gender studies. Specifically, my identity as a Black gay
man was not something I had the privilege to take off before class. However, my position as a
WGS TA and personal identity created an opportunity to empathize with my students. By letting
them go early after brief discussion, I gave them free time ponder over what the last couple of
weeks have meant for them. I encouraged them to think through how this informs the activist
work we do in the future.

Conclusion

As an instructor, I use popular culture in class often. I try to find texts that help flesh out the
ideas of the course reading of the day and that will provoke discussion. I look for texts that I
think my students can either identify with or that will force them to decenter themselves. In
picking my three messy teachable literacy narratives, I used Bryant Keith Alexander notion of a
“teachable moment” as a guide. He writes,

The catchphrase ‘a teachable moment’ identifies an intersection in time and
space in which the ignorance of one person can be informed by another; and
the conditions under which we live can be used to impart knowledge as well
as to engage a critical dialogue. (249)

I see a teachable moment as similar to a literacy narrative in the sense that it is still speaking to a
rite of passage or coming into consciousness. Each of the three teachable moments or literacy
narratives tell a story where my identity as a Black gay man informed my discourse with students
about popular culture and in turn that created an alternative space to critically engage with how
gender and sexuality function. These moments presented a “Hmm… Eureka!” effect, in the sense
that it showed me that the messiness that comes with discussing controversial issues cannot be
avoided. Like the narratives that Jonathan Alexander, Bettina Love, and Bryant Keith Alexander
share, these moments also demonstrated that my students were watching me and my reactions to
these issues. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes teaching as a performative act. She
writes:

> Teachers are not performers in the traditional sense of the word in that our work is
> not meant to be a spectacle. Yet it is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls
everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in
learning. (11)

When I give all of myself to my teaching, I see myself as doing this type of transgressive work. I
do not present these narratives as just *add water and stir* curriculum. In fact, I am doing quite the
opposite. I am using my narratives to provoke us all to think about the ways gender, sex and
sexual identity construct how we view the world. Specifically, these narratives present examples
of messy pedagogy or pedagogy gone wrong where my ambivalence towards an objective ethos
created possibility.
Like the preceding chapters in this dissertation, this chapter uses narrative as a method to engage with larger sexual and cultural literacies. The narratives serve as texts to critically engage with popular literacies and discourses around gender, sexual identity and performance. Specifically, I focus on my experience as a graduate teaching assistant in teaching gender and sexuality inquiry based academic writing and introduction to women and gender studies courses. The vast majority of my students are white and presumably heterosexual. In these narratives, I moderate discussions with my students around popular culture texts to encourage them to examine how gender and sexuality are constructed in our society. The narratives demonstrate the layered and multiple ways in which students often read my body as an instructor. As fierce literacy narratives, these moments also demonstrate the multiple ways that my identity as a Black gay man and my relationship to popular culture signify a Black queer cultural body of knowledge and inadvertently created moments of messiness.

The narratives in this chapter demonstrate the multiple ways that being out and read as queer by one’s students creates opportunity for students to think critically about possibility. My narratives about teaching with pop culture text demonstrate the multiple ways that we bring multiple parts of ourselves to the table when teaching. They critically engage sexual literacies through popular culture texts. These texts help think and discuss the ways in which gender, sexual identity and performance and circulated and reproduced in our culture. These narratives allow me to demonstrate ways in which my visibility as a Black gay man is unavoidable. However, they also demonstrate the various ways that my body and personality created possibility to engage with the messiness of how we understand sexual identity and performance to function.
In a lot of ways, fierce literacies are about creating space. The participants in my two interview-based studies and many of the performers in Paris speak back to un-nuanced readings of language, sexual orientation and gender performance in order to create a space where their stories can be heard and understood. Paris performers discuss Harlem Ballroom culture and tell their stories in order to impart their wisdom to a new generation. My examination of shade demonstrates how Black queer people verbally spar and signify as a rite of passage into friendship groups. In their discussions of pullin’ trade, the participants worked to demystify heterosexuality in order to explain a world where self-identified heterosexual men could have sexual interactions with gay men and transwomen. Lastly, I have offered three “teach-able” moments where I used pop culture texts to help students think through literacies around race and sexuality which also demonstrated how I was visible to my students as a Black gay male. In each of these contexts, my participants and I created space to explore how Black queer people understand, talk back to, compose, and engage with the world(s) around them. Fierce literacies explore how Black queer people tell stories and how through the telling of these truths create space within and beyond larger oppressive forces.
Throughout this dissertation, I have illustrated some of the many ways Black queer people refashion static or mainstream understanding of literacy in order to survive. In my work with *Paris*, I found that Black queer people often share their stories to the next generation for survival. In my interviews at Washington D.C. Black gay pride, I talked with other Black gay men and transwomen about how their narratives around reading and throwing shade and how these practices play a role in creating community amongst Black queer people. My interviews with Black gay men and trans women at Harlem Pride helped me illustrate how sex between heterosexual men and Black queer people complicate static ideas of sexual identity and gender performance. This dissertation illustrates that literacy needs to understood beyond literacy normativity. It needs to be understood and studied as an embodied and social practice, where meaning is being created on the spot and in conversation with dominant discourses.

Through my analyses of these interviews, I found that that Black queer people continually work to correct and respond to problematic depictions of their lives. This study is a project about honoring Black queer lives and knowledges. It is not simply a critique of racist and heteronormative understandings, but a celebration of stories—of literacies—that are corrective and sometimes playful. I conclude with two implications or take-away for scholars of literacy, composition and women and gender studies: video interview as an ethnographic method and (M)esearch and Black Queer Ancestry.

*Video Interview as Method*
Video methodology offers promising implications for understanding literacy and Black queer lives. While it proved effective for the shade chapter, it proved less so for the trade chapter. Still, it represents an important area of research that I plan to take up in my future work. My use of video interview gave me (and by extension the readers) the opportunity to see what the participants were saying verbally and nonverbally. Using video was extremely helpful in my examination of shade because my participants were very excited to share narratives and continue conversations about gay slang that they were having already. Through continued drafts and presentation and regularly catching a new nuance to what participants were attempting to convey through their responses to my questions.

However, the participants who I asked about pullin’ trade were less open to share stories due to the Pride event setting and the subject matter. This is something I will keep in mind for future research. The use of video in a public park encouraged my participants to talk freely about language. I would also like to film at parties, living rooms, kitchens, beaches, churches, bars, brunches and various other places where Black queer people congregate. Lastly this project has evolved from conversations I was having at parties into a dissertation. I plan to continue filming more individual and group interviews with more Black queer people. My aim is to turn this project into a digital book and documentary so that the interviews can be seen and heard, as well as read. I also hope that in this form it will be accessible to Black queer people and various communities outside the academy as well.

*(M)*e*search and Black Queer Ancestry*

This study functions as a form of me-search in the sense that I am examining a Black queer community of which I am a part. My existing knowledge and even my appearance gave me a relationship and access to the research population. By approaching the subject of Black queer
slang as act of genius, I was able to engage with Black queer people as they displayed their genius and complex understandings of what it means to be both Black and queer in America. This research engages with the ways multiple identities and oppressions intersect and inform how we compose and engage with the world around us. It also points to the need of a greater understanding of the lives of Black queer people on their own terms. There will always be white people who are curious and try to understand from the outside. I made the choice in this dissertation to resist focusing solely on the outsider. I focused on my and other Black queer people’s relationship with our own language from a point of critical engagement, as opposed to simple translation.

In order to examine one’s language, you must examine their world. Thus, a central take away from this study is that our examination of literacy needs to go beyond simply alphabetic texts and to take into account how literacies are embodied, performed, and culturally situated. The topic of Black queer ancestry came up in many of the interviews. Joseph and Brant referenced performers from Paris Is Burning, Trans activist Marsha P Johnson, and others as Black queer ancestors as sources of knowledge. Many of the participants also saw themselves as doing similar work by leaving knowledge for the next generation. As a scholar, I believe that this is why my work is important. The nature of academic texts is that they are read, cited, and live on after the original publication. Writers like Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, E. Lynn Harris, Joseph Beam, June Jordan, Marlon Riggs and Chris Bell live on through me and this piece, even though they have passed. Essentially, this whole dissertation was my way of leaving my literacies, who inspired me, and how I have survived up until this point for a new generation of Black queer scholars.
In one of the closing scenes of Paris is Burning, Corey reflects on life and what it means to make an impact. While applying the finishing touches of her makeup, she confesses that she always wanted to be a big star but as she got older her goals changed.

Everybody wants to make an impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think, you've made a mark on the world if you just get through it, and a few people remember your name. Then you've left a mark. You don't have to bend the whole world. I think it's better to just enjoy it. Pay your dues, and just enjoy it. If you shoot an arrow and it goes real high, hooray for you.

Hooray for you indeed. Corey tells the viewers to enjoy lives rather than to focus on huge accomplishments. She describes survival as proof that you have made a mark. Many of the participants I interviewed were excited about the opportunity to be interviewed because they were having similar conversations with their friend groups. Like the performers in Paris, some of my participants hold mentorship positions in the community and wanted to tell the truth for the next generation. My dissertation is based on Black queer people telling such truths.
Narrating Shade

Patrick: No, I say OK, well I can tell you that over the years the definition has changed. Cause if you watch movies like Paris Is Burning they have like kind of definition of it. I can't tell you exactly what it is.

Brant: Shade is... It’s sort of like an elevated way of... to me. It’s like a heightened sense, like, haute (like haute couture) It’s like haute teasing.

James: I mean it’s sass. I think it can be playful when you’re trying to like rag on your friends or/and sometimes in the Black gay community it’s kind of a way to cut someone down. Cutting them down with words.

Mervin: What I think shade is is... usually when gay men get together. It depends. There are two different variations. One can be like joking around, kind of cracking jokes, being lil shady, throwing shade at your friends, but it can be in a humorous way but then sometimes I think when people are jealous or what we consider haters they may say
things to try to pull out something negative about somebody. So maybe talk about the way they look, the clothes that they’re wearing, something negative that can just make them look bad.

AJ: I think shade is a form of expression that is within the Black gay community of kind of making fun of each other or joking with each other in a playful way. I think it is important to know if you are going to throw shade, you need to know what those boundaries are of shade and disrespectful. I think it’s right there on the cusp and I think it’s a form of communication that is really popular in our community.

Brant: But I feel like for people to do shade well, you have to know someone and so I always want to say that it is more akin to teasing then harassing or like being belligerent towards someone.

Seth: OK. So, like what would you say the difference between shade and reading is?
Brant: I feel like with reading it’s sort of... It’s more... I would say that it’s like slapstick and sort of like you're going for like the quick joke. With reading, like you just want to pull out, pull it out really quick...

Seth: More direct?

Brant: Right. But with shade it can be more. It can be longer. I feel like with reading it’s like Abbott and Costello and with shade it’s sort of like Shakespeare. The idea is the same. It’s entertaining. You’re gonna laugh. But It's like the context, shade gives it more depth.

Donnell: When you throw shade, just like she said it’s how. It’s the setting. the place, the time, what you’re doing at the moment. It’s like all of that crap. If I threw shade at her now, as you know, this my sister so I wouldn’t throw shade at her to like to belittle her and disrespect her. I just play with her and she throws shade back. It then turns into what she called a Kiki and then we’d be like, oh bitch, you tried it and you know, it makes you like check yourself. You know what I’m saying? If she said I look a mess or something, just throwing shade. I’d be like, “hold on, wait a
minute, you're playing games.” And It’s out of fun, but if we was to see a random walk by we'd be like, “Look at this mother fucker. Her wig is laid like Whitney Houston's third cousin. Like have you seen that on YouTube? You know what I'm talking about?

Seth: Where is that from?

Donnell: Just like turning it. Huh?

Seth: Where is that from?

Donnell: It’s on YouTube. If you look at "Whitney Houston's third cousin," like the shit is funny.

Xion: I think overall, it's just like not only when you see something you just can't take but... What am I trying to say? Especially... a lot of times also in this community especially being a Trans Woman, when you see something or you know something about a person that you know it’s very sensitive to them or it’s like a part of their self-esteem or anything and you purposely throw that out there to damage them, that's just like shade overhaul.
Donnell: That's the ultimate shade. If you will... We call that the ultimate shade.

Brant: I feel like shade can be really, really damaging. You can see things that like really hurt a person’s feelings. If you take from the small attributes of a person and make them big, I think that’s part of what shade is a sort of like taking little itty-bitty clues about who a person is and how their personality is, and how they look and making a big grandiose statement about them.

AJ: There is the shade you can throw with your friends. "Girl you look real big like no legs, lookin a walrus or something. Something with your friends... and then there’s the shade from people you don’t get along with. They look in the street like, “What is he wearing?”

Mervin: For example, I'll tell you an example here at this event we're at. This Black Pride event. There are a few guys here that... There's one guy in particular I went on a date with, whose here, the date didn't go so well but I just don't feel the need to speak to him. And I see him, and he sees me. So, in a way I was throwing shade because I’ve just
decided not to speak to him when I walked past him. It’s like really when it gets to the bottom like, why am I doing that? It’s kind of a little immature, but at the time it goes back to again insecurities. The date didn’t go the way I wanted it to do. So, I feel like I need to do what I can to make him feel a certain way.

Seth: ...to feel like you felt about the date.

Mervin: Exactly. I think that’s what people do. They throw shade to make people feel the way that they feel. Even if they didn’t do anything to them, initially, if they feel bad about not having designer clothing or having a great job, they’ll find a way to make you feel bad by throwing shade.

Seth: Who would you say throws the best shade?

AJ: Who throws the best shade? Well me, of course.

Patrick: I want to say like...the older queens actually have the actual art of shade like it’s evolved over the years and I think that the older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade. It's just I’ve been read by an old queen as a friend
and it be jokingly, and it's actually really like wow. Like I wouldn’t have never thought about that.

Seth: Tell you me what groups throw the best shade. Do you guys think Black men, Black gay men, throw the best shade or Black women?

Donnell: Black gay men are funny but those White men...

Xion: The White corporate queens give me my life.

Donnell: They funny. They feel as though like, “Bitch, you can't touch me” and like don't get me wrong they cool. Like everybody is cool. Shade is funny regardless. But to Black people, it’s like their shade is more raunchy. They just out there to get you but with white people it’s like “Bitch, you look a mess. Like you think about it and you’re like who would say that.”

Xion: Exactly.

Donnell: Black people be like, “Girl, she look turned naked.” “Like, he look ugly back.” Like shit like they, they add extra little words to make it funny.
AJ: I don't know. Personally, my best friend Mervin, who is over there, throws a lot of shade. He’s really well at doing it.

Patrick: But it's basically just calling somebody out about their flaws in a way that... I can't describe it... like in a way that you like for instance, to give you an example, my co-worker like we work together, and I was on Jack'd and he was like...

Seth: What's Jack'd?

Patrick: Jack'd was like a social media website, or social media application on your phone. Basically, like to meet other guys or talk to other guys whatever. And so, I was on Jack’d and he was like just giving like (I was) giving like... loose boots, which means basically that I was just for the most part, just being just loose with myself like talking to guys I don't even know about. you. Telling them all about me, and I just think that it’s an art of basically telling people about themselves and just kind of calling them out in a cute smart way and I think...
Seth: So was him calling you loose boots… was that shade?

Patrick: Yeah, that was shady.

Seth: Now why was that shady?

Patrick: Because my thing is if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say it all, but he could have easily been like, “Oh, you a hoe or you're being whorish,” but he said it...

Using shade is like giving "loose boots” It’s like a jargon.

Seth: It’s saying it without saying.

Patrick: Essentially.

Shade on the Out-side

Patrick: Like in today’s society, like our lifestyle, like the Black gay lifestyle is being merged with mainstream society. So, when you see dances, like, you know, Jennifer Lopez just had a video come out. Look it up. And there’s voguing in it. And Beyoncé has those techniques in her videos. And I
mean, I just think that shade is included in that merge. How is it being used? I mean just look at the way Tamar Braxton talks.

Seth: How does she talk?

Patrick: I'm just like, “Girl, get your life!” It's just like it’s a merger. I can't explain it. It's good because it's getting us out there. But it's kind of sad because it's our own kind of identity that's being kind of taken.

Seth: Do you see shade being used like on television or like in the larger society?

Brant: I do think that. I think that um... I mean... obviously it's like with shade and reading. Those things were sort of popularized by Paris is burning in the early nineties, with like voguing and when, when, so that stuff was sort of presented to larger society or even just LGBT people because obviously like voguing and the ball scene came from the African American community and then it developed into being embraced by the gay community.
Then Madonna took it and made into like, "Things for White people."

AJ: I've realized that even in pop media, especially the reality TV shows, they've taken the black and gay language and they've incorporated into the Real Housewives, Married to Medicine, Bad Girls Club, and all these reality TV shows where they use the word shade a lot. They say like, "Oh, that's a shade!" or "Why you throwing shade at me?" I saw in the reunion of the Housewives of Atlanta. I think it's just something that's really becoming really popular and it's in the culture right now. I even have some straight male friends say, "Oh, that's the shade." So, I think it's starting to evolve into its own, you know.

Xion: All of the housewives.

Donnell: TMZ

Xion: Wendy Williams is cute shade.
Donnell: What's that Bitch? Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny. You can't tell Joan Rivers nothing. You look at her and you're like, “Look at your face!” Peeled. Like your face is pulled back for three gods.

Seth: ...but she shades herself about it.

Xion: Yeah, exactly.

Donnell: She shades herself about it, but she like, “I don't give a fuck. I did it. I know I did it but it ain't nothing that you can tell me that I cannot tell myself but Imma go in on your ass.” Who else I like? Willie Williams! shady.

Xion: She shades herself too and I've realized it recently. I know in a lot of the media people or people in general just like the whole “She's a trans sexual” allegations like the other day on her show she was like “I can't wait to get back stage, to quit, and get out of this drag.” I thought that was hilarious. Like that's shade within itself.

Donnell: That's funny. And everybody always say Wendy Williams is a drag queen.
Xion: (indiscernible)

Donnell: Getting rid of the Adam's apple and all, bitch. Just peeling.

Seth: Do you feel like shade should be used outside of the black gay community or what?

Mervin: I think it is but it is also not. What do you mean “Do I think it should be used?” I don't think it should be used at all to be honest.

Seth: Interesting point. From what I was thinking of... is like seeing like maybe a straight white guy talking about throwing shade.

Mervin: I don't know because I think that once you go outside of our community it starts changing what it means for us. I find a lot of times, that's a big issue with a lot of things that we do. It starts one way but over time when it gets into mainstream, it starts to look a lot different and people start to interact with it a lot differently. So, I do feel like if the white community or other communities get a hold of shade (heterosexual community the white community), they definitely change the idea of what we see shade as. Ya
know and pretty soon it will be a completely different definition to the term shade.

Brant: It’s hard because it’s sort of like things like RuPaul’s Drag Race have made using the vocabulary very trendy. I think it gets muddled a bit now but I think you see it. I see one of my friends I'm from North Carolina. I went to college in Greensboro, North Carolina, and she posted a thing the other day that was like “What is shade?” This straight woman had had an experience with shade obviously. I don't know what it was, but she heard the word and he didn't know what it was. And she was embarrassed to ask and she said that on Facebook in her Facebook status. And another straight African American woman was like, “Yeah, I don't know. Can someone explain this to me?” And so, I found this article online that was like, “Straight people, this is what shade is...” So, I shared it with them. Um, and so I think that it's something that people are getting to be aware of even though it's obviously been around much much longer. So, it's because we have outlets like things like RuPaul's drag race that help popularize like drag. There's other parts of drag and I think that I think drag in the
African American community have a very specific relationship. They kind of like mold together to integrate into the larger society.

Seth: Okay now, I'm going to have to go for the obvious question: Do you consider shade to be a black thing or what's that?

Brant: I wouldn't say that now. I wouldn't say like, oh well like, “black people throw shade,” but I feel like I feel like they're cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another. I think, and this is obviously based on very little... you can't be very educated on the history of shade unless you were writing your doctoral thesis on it. And so, it's my understanding that that sort of something that came from like a subculture of African American LGBT people and then it was popularized by all gay people. So, I don't think, I would say “Shade is for Black people” now. But I would argue that it was. And maybe... I don't know White people that say like shade without them somewhat evoking something that's very, like, that's separate from them. Does that make sense?
They'll say like, “Oh, she's throwing shade” but it's clear they're quoting like, I don't want to use this example so much but RuPaul's Drag Race or trying to quote other things that people say without knowing the context of it.

Seth: Do you ever see shade on social media?

James: I mean recently I guess it’s more like twitter. I don't understand. I mean it's just like by saying your little things like “This person is no one” or you'll be hating. People are doing it on twitter. That's what I see more of. I'm not technically on Facebook cause twitter I mean it's where you can say the least amount of things possible. So, it's like just something quick.

Seth: So it's kind of a breeding ground for shade since you have to be abbreviated in first place. Okay. What about Instagram? Are you on Instagram?

James: I am on Instagram. But I'm not, I mean I on it. I just when I get a picture, I do it. I mean I don't personally see a lot of people doing it but I don't look for it either.

Donnell: Yeah, the they read.
Xion: All the time they read for filth.

Donnell: Definitely when they tell people that their hair is laid like Nene Leakes.

Xion: Or sometimes I'll see sometimes on Instagram or Facebook. If somebody says for example, I comment on your status and one of your friends so-call themselves throwing shade at me because (indiscernible), they make little asteroids going up and do an LOL or do something about the person up without mentioning them. To me, I think that’s so much shade but it’s funny.

Donnell: Now when people say, “I died” like “I nearly died”, I laugh so hard. I'm sorry, God. Throwing shade is like "bitches be like my hair growing". They got the small little ponytail, ya know.

Xion: All those Instagram pictures are shady.

Donnell: I be like, “That's some shady shit.” That's funny. You think about it and you think about a bitch in your neighborhood, or like a girl in your neighborhood, or somebody in your neighborhood say they hair growing and you look at them
like, “You know damn well your shit ain't growing. You lying like shit. No, you had to perm it to get that small ponytail.” Like, that's throwing shade. I just threw shade.

AJ:

It's really bad because I work with the youth and a lot of times they won't throw shade to their face but they'll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone... or posting text message conversations stuff like that to hurt somebody. I think that's when we cross the boundary from shade to disrespect. I think it’s a very fine line and people like to take advantage of crossing that line. Because when they take it too far and someone calls them out on it, they can say “Aww... I was joking. I was just throwing shade” and they don't get held accountable for what they say.

Seth:

Do you see it on twitter?

AJ:

Definitely. Twitter, Facebook, all types (indiscernible).

Seth:

Okay, Well I definitely appreciate your help. Great Interview.
Shade to Survive

Seth: Is shade always a negative thing?

Patrick: No, I think it’s just like for instance if you have a good friend and you're talking to them and you're being shady towards each other it's just kind of like, it's really just a way to, I guess, confirm your friendships, if that makes sense. Not everybody could throw shade at me. I wouldn't allow it. Some people say it and I kind of clap back. I have an issue with it. If it's somebody close to me or someone I trust, or a friend and they're being shady, it's cute. I actually enjoy it. Because the art of shade is wit.
Seth: So, everyone can't throw shade, then?

Patrick: No, not everyone can throw it. Some people are a little too dense in the head to do something like that.

Donnell: And in D.C., we call it slicing. Slicing is nothing but to hype it up.

Xion: I think sometimes... I know myself I tend to throw shade or kiki to just make situations better. Like I could come out and say, "Oh, I just feel like doing this event as a performer, I'm gonna make fifty dollars."

Donnell: Ok.

Xion: In the back of my head, shade is: look at the crowd, look at the population I'm serving. Look where the stage is. I don't see it happening but sometimes as friends we kiki and ha-ha to pacify the situation almost like making jokes out of it so that nobody feel crazy... (indiscernible)

Donnell: Bitch, you know damn well you ain't finna make fifty dollars with these little bit ass people but you gon make that fifty dollars. Like ya know just slicing it. "You gon make that fifty." See that hand. "You gon make that fifty dollars." You know how like slicin it.

Seth: That was the... that's the shade right there.
Donnell: That's the shade

Seth: Okay.

James: I have a lot of straight friends and heterosexual friends that...I think it's more like special to gay culture in a straight world they don't know what shade is. Like it's an insult. Like I guess if you say something that's kind of tongue and cheek or just rude. So, I think that in the gay world to make it playful or make it a little but special I guess that's why it’s called shade.

AJ: To me shade is very interesting because I think that there is a level of playful joking around with shade, but when I'm really looking at shade, I'm looking at the root of where it came from and a lot of times I feel like it's... you're doing that compensate for your own things that you might be self-conscious about or things that you're uncomfortable with yourself. You will deflect that and throw shade at somebody else. So, you're not looking at yourself, if that makes any sense. And then you play it off by making it into a joke. Even though sometimes there's some truth behind it.

Mervin: I think there are a lot of insecurities in our community. I think it stems from all we have to deal with outside of our community. And then within our community there are a lot of guys who are under a lot of pressure to look a certain way, dress a certain way. They have to wear certain labels.
They have to hang out with certain people. And if they don't do these things often times or if they can't do these things, sometimes times they can become shady to other people who can or who are considered attractive and what we consider to be attractive.

Donnell: If I was to look at Xion and be like, "Bitch, look at Erykah Badu." Because she got the wrap on her head. You know what I'm saying? That's throwing shade. But at the same time...

Xion: Which is a kiki for me because I live for Erykah

Donnell: Basically, she lived for Erykah, but at the same time I'm looking at Xion like "That's my bitch." I like the wrap. It fits you. But you know if you say something funny out the mouth to me bitch, Imma cut your ass up. I don't know if we can curse or not but...

Seth: Oh no, no, definitely, definitely.

Donnell: ...but it is what it is. That's the way I am

Seth: It’s part of it. It’s part of it.

Seth: Now why do you think people throw shade?
James: I think people have different motivations, I guess. I mean I think like I said, it's like if it's a friend, like sometimes you can rag on your friends if they're not wearing like... if they're looking a little rough or whatever. Then, I mean Sometimes there's just like a way of playing with them. I don't know, I mean other ways? Like I mean I guess that's the thing if it's your friend, playing around, but then that could easily turn into something else if your intention is different.

Seth: Now who throws the best shade? Like what type of person? What groups?

James: Well people here in D.C. throw a lot of shade. I just move out from California. Yeah, it wasn't too much shade being thrown over there. So...

Seth: Why do you think that is?

James: So, I think it's just laid back. California's very laid, very relaxing and people I mean it’s just I guess they have other things to do then do that. But here I notice especially a lot of the gay black guys. They, they can throw. They can throw it. Definitely.

Seth: How does it make you feel? Ok, because it's very interesting because you're white, but your black friends pointed you out as like a master shade thrower. Like what do you make of that?
Brant: (chuckles) I don't know... but wouldn't say (chuckles) It kind of embarrassing. Um, I don't know. It's harder for me because I don't think that sometimes I'm like, "Oh, it's my intention to throw shade now." But again, as someone who deflects a lot, who teases other people because I have, I have, I am sensitive. So, people tease me all the time about lots of things. So, I have to learn to tease other people and I, I think that because I don't. It’s very interesting. So, I tease people without really meaning to hurt anyone's feelings. I don't like to hurt anyone's feelings. So, when I throw shade I think, I think I might present myself in that way like what I said, being regal and sort of distancing myself from it a little bit because I don't want to look like I'm trying to hurt someone's feelings. So, when I make fun of you, I do it in this very overt grandiose way. So, it looks like I'm presenting as a joke instead of like trying to hurt someone's feelings. Does that make sense?

Seth: Yes. Okay, then that makes me ask do you ever throw shade in combat then, in verbal combat?

Brant: Um, not really. I'm not very combative. So, it’s hard. Like if someone gives me... like if someone makes fun of me, I will. I will. So, an example. Someone on Facebook. I keep using Facebook. I hate being digital generation. They were like, "Oh, I'm finally back at the gym. #Shredded"
And so I commented, "Shredded, as in you shredded up your gym membership end now you're finally getting to go back" and everyone was like said that was shade, but I was like, "Oh no, I'm just making fun of the words that you used." And so, then he replied with, "Yeah darling, I'll see you at Dunkin donuts tomorrow morning" because I go to Dunkin donuts every single day. And so, like he got me and that's hilarious. So, I won't really combat with someone if they get a good one on me because I want them to be like... if you get me, you could have that. Because I am going for the laugh. If a lot of people will laugh at something, if it’s at my expense, I will bow down and be like "Yes, go ahead." Because that's what... I want everyone to have a good time.
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Solnit, Rebecca. “A Rape a Minute, A Thousand Corpses a Year.” The Nation 2013, January 24.


EDUCATION

PhD Candidate in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric
Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S.) in Women and Gender Studies
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
(Anticipated completion: January 2018)

Dissertation: Fierce: Black Queer Literacies of Survival

Dissertation committee: Patrick W. Berry and Gwendolyn D. Pough (co-chairs); Eileen Schell, Brice Nordquist, and Eric Pritchard

M.A., Communication Studies (Communication Liberal Arts and Sciences)
Ball State University, Muncie, IN
(May 2011)

B.S. in Speech Communication and Theatre
Tennessee State University, Nashville TN
(May 2009)
Magna Cum Laude

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

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PUBLICATIONS

“Throwing Shade in the Park: Literacy Narratives at Black Gay Pride.” *Literacy and Composition Studies* (under review)


AWARDS & DISTINCTIONS

Research Grant, Composition and Cultural Rhetoric
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Summer 2017

Research Grant, Women’s and Gender Studies
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Summer 2017

Certificate in University Teaching, The Graduate School and Future Professoriate Program
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
May 2014

Research Grant, Composition and Cultural Rhetoric, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Summer 2013

Building Better Communities Fellowship, Emerging Leadership Award
Ball State University, Muncie IN
February 2011

National Communication Association, Student of Color Travel Grant, November 2010

Travel Grant, Department of Communication
Ball State University, Muncie IN
November 2010

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Department of Women and Gender Studies
WGS 201: Transnational Feminist Studies, Fall 2016–Present
Led discussion sections for introductory writing-intensive course that explores transnational feminism, including how constructions of gender and differences shape the lives and activism of women around the world.

WGS 101: Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies
Served as discussion leader for introductory course designed to familiarize students with the study of women, gender, and sexualities in national and international contexts.

Syracuse University Athletic Department
Instructional Assistant, July 2017–Present
Assisted student athletes with goal development, both short-term and long-term, as well as organization, time management, note taking, test preparation, and critical thinking
Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition
WRT 105: Practices of Academic Writing, Fall 2011–2013, Fall 2015
Taught introduction to academic writing focusing on analysis and argument, practices that carry across disciplinary lines and into professional and civic writing.

WRT 205: Critical Research and Writing, Spring 2012–Spring 2016
Taught sophomore-level course on research writing across academic genres. Course inquiries included “Reimagining the Normal,” as well as those that I developed that include “What’s Your Fantasy: Gender & Sexuality in Hip-Hop,” “After Caitlyn: Race & Gender in Popular Culture.”

WRT 307: Professional Writing, Fall 2014
Taught course that focuses on professional communication through the study of audience, purpose, and ethics.

Writing Center, Summer 2014
Served as a writing consultant to students across campus.

Ball State University, Muncie, IN
Department of Communication Studies
COMM 210: Fundamentals of Public Speaking, Fall 2009–Spring 2011
Led discussion section for course focused on helping students develop oral communication skills, as well as an awareness of the role of communication in culture.

PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOPS
Discussion Leader, Reel Feminisms: Moonlight. Department of Women’s and Gender Studies and the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Doctoral Program. Syracuse NY. October 2017
Moderated screening and discussion of Black masculinity, addiction, and homophobia in Moonlight.

Project Alpha Workshop Leader, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity (Iota Kappa Lambda Graduate Chapter)
Syracuse NY. April 2017
Moderated discussion for national program about sexual health and self-esteem with teenage Black men and fraternity members.

McNair Writing Workshop, Syracuse University McNair Program
    Led professional writing workshop, focusing on résumés and various application materials for McNair scholars.

Bricolage Workshop, The Black Man Can Institute, Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY. June 2014–Present
    Taught young men bricolage while also creating a space for them to engage with their emotions through symbols.

Writing Our Lives Outreach Program, Syracuse University
    Led workshop focused on issues of gender in Hip-Hop vernacular. Writing Our Lives is a program dedicated to promoting writing in the lives of youth, in and out of school.

Discussion Leader, ARISE, Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY. September 2012
    Served as discussion leader on Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

**SERVICE**

Member, College of Arts and Sciences Student Standards Committee, Syracuse University
January 2013–May 2014

Host, *This Rhetorical Life* [Podcast]
Syracuse University Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Doctoral Program
December 2012–Present

Chair, Affective Learning Committee
Ball State University, September 2010–May 2011
    Led committee that evaluated curriculum in order to make it more culturally relevant.
Member, CCIM Diversity Committee
Ball State University, September 2010–May 2011

Reviewer, Writing Proficiency Program
The Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research
Ball State University, November 2010

Judge, Age of Aquarius Speech Tournament
Ball State University, October 2010

Judge, Civic Engagement Speech Competition
Ball State University, December 2010
CONFERENCE PAPERS AND INVITED PRESENTATIONS


“Reads, Tea(s) and Kiki’s: Refashioning Literacies in Digital Spaces.” Computers and Writing Conference. Stout, WI. May 2015

Panel Participant. Feminism and Black Women. Alpha Kappa Alpha (Iota Upsilon chapter), Syracuse University, Syracuse NY. January 2015.

Panel Discussion. 1 Step Forward, 2 Steps Back. Delta Sigma Theta (Kappa Lambda chapter), Syracuse University, Syracuse NY. November 2014.


“Reading Shade: Writing a Black Queer Rhetoric.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. Indianapolis, IN. March 2014.


Building a Meaningful Career During and Beyond Graduate School. CCR Community Day, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. August 2012.


“Morehouse Masculinities: Can a Morehouse Man be a Mean Girl?” University of Texas at San Antonio African American Studies Symposium, San Antonio, TX. April 2012.


Empowerment Forum. Syracuse Academy of Science, Syracuse NY, April 2012.

“Independent Womanists?: An examination of Destiny’s Child’s Survivor.” Rhetorical Theory and Criticism Division. CSCA Convention, Milwaukee, WI, April 2011.

“Mr. and Miss Swag. G.I.F.T.S.” Great Ideas For Teaching. CSCA Convention, Milwaukee, WI, April 2011.

“It’s (Queer) Barbie!”: The Sexual Evolution of Nicki Minaj. CCIM Kaleidoscope Diversity Symposium, Ball State University, Muncie IN. February 2011.
“Baby You Got What I Want: An Examination of Missy Elliott’s ‘Hot Boys’ through the eyes of Hélène Cixous.” CCIM Kaleidoscope Diversity Student Symposium, Ball State University, Muncie, IN., March 2010.

TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN SKILLS
Digital audio/video: Audacity, GarageBand, iMovie
Graphics: Photoshop, Illustrator, iPhoto,

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS & AFFILIATIONS
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Rhetoric Society of America
National Council of Teachers of English
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated (Iota Kappa Lambda Chapter)
National Communications Association
Black Graduate Student Association
Conference on College Composition and Communications

REFERENCES
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