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The Process Becomes Part of You: A Methodology for Analyzing Institutional Mediation and Programmatic Possibilities in Community Writing

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Abstract

To guide antiracist curriculum reform in higher education and better support college writers from racially marginalized and traditionally underserved backgrounds, this dissertation emerged from a five-year ethnographic study of a slam and spoken-word poetry program housed in a DEI office at a large research university. Merging feminist ethnographic methods and sociolinguistic scalar theory, this study develops a methodology for analyzing how institutional influence affects how people engage with writing programs in curricular, co-curricular, and community contexts alike—even in spaces outside of formal institutional structures. The study finds that student writers use slam and spoken-word poetry to bridge the embodied knowledge they carry from their lived experiences with the abstract knowledge they've gained through their studies to better navigate the world. By strategically sharing that embodied knowledge, their "radical truth," the students challenge and influence the core beliefs grounding their communities, making them more inclusive. However, layers of institutional influence, which vary across spaces, affect when and how the students share their knowledge and the extent they are effective. This study has important implications regarding how to identify and reform racist or oppressive institutional structures; how writing program administrators might engage co-curricular writing spaces as part of an antiracist, ecological assessment model; and how to evaluate institutional influence when developing community-based writing programs.

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Community Writing

by

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Introduction: Worldmaking in the Shadows of Institutional Failures

This dissertation ultimately seeks to understand community, belonging, and worldmaking in a time when institutional failures are making the world unlivable. In my own life, I've experienced community that has been invigorating and life affirming. However, in popular discourse, the term "community" is so overused that it can refer to any group anywhere without a consistent conceptual undergirding, rendering it meaningless. Given the challenges facing society, I believe that building stronger community spaces of healing are essential for meeting local needs effectively, but doing so in the shadows of institutions that seem to be in varying states of decay evoke philosophical and pragmatic questions about how institutions shape human interactions; when institutional mediation is necessary; and how near or far from an institution a writing program should be to best support the needs of the people it aims to serve. This dissertation is grounded in a five-year ethnographic study of a spoken-word poetry program that I call "Radical Truth," which is housed along the margins of a large university. Through studying Radical Truth and the literacy practices of its participants, I hope to shed light on questions pertaining to how to best build community writing spaces for healing and how to assess the ways institutional mediation affects programmatic possibilities in those spaces.

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When I try to think back to my earlier memoires of community, I remember house shows and mosh pits. Mosh pits create a sort of life-energy, a way of knowing and being, in and of itself. They grow or shrink, shifting shape in response to the music and

people in them. The punches, kicks, and shoves would come in waves, reminding me of

how I used to submit to the ocean when I was a child, giving up control, and letting my

body be tossed, tumbled, and pulled out with the tide. I was a good swimmer, and there

was nothing to fear. The mosh pit was no different. We operated on emotion and

instinct, neither as individuals nor cogs in a machine or organs in a body, but as vectors

for energy moving from one node to another, evoking a fuzzy state of being where it's

unclear where one begins and another ends. Blood, sweat, and spit smear across

bodies under the annihilating pulse of drums, guitar, shrieking feedback, and screaming.

It is violent, but a violence rooted in a deep commitment to care, which I now

understand to be truly healing, begetting a bond and a way of interpersonal

understanding that's stronger than anything language alone can produce. If anyone

would fall, we'd pick them up in an instant. If anyone got seriously hurt, they'd be pulled

from the pit, back to the human world, the world of discourse and reason, and be tended

to by a friend with a warm damp cloth and a bag of frozen vegetables.

As a younger man, I sought belonging in activist spaces, thinking that if I could

meet people who were animated by the same dynamics as me, I'd finally be

understood. Living in Tucson, Arizona around the millennium, I was drawn to causes

involving queer visibility and support for migrants. This was mostly rooted in my own

experiences with homophobia and the disturbing sights that become part of life when

living near one of the largest militarized borders in the world. As a progressive city with

a large university, Tucson afforded plenty of opportunities to get involved, but despite

what I was looking for, activist communities aren't always the warmest spaces. Most all

of us have lived through painful experiences to bring us to a place of anger and distrust

against the state and mainstream society, and that distrust sometimes seeped into our relationships with each other. People's motives for being involved in a given cause or project were complex and muddled, making it difficult for people to communicate their needs and intentions. Dogmatic adherence to radical theory oftentimes got in the way of being able to respond to one another and the situations we found ourselves in with compassion and empathy. And when so much of one's life is centered around fighting against what's wrong in the world, it's easy to fall into deep despair.

The first time I encountered slam poetry was around that time when I was involved with activist groups in Tucson. One of my favorite hangout spots downtown was this space called Solar Culture, which served as an art gallery by day and a concert venue by night. The space was the small, intimate, and weird, and they'd book a wide range of artists from large national acts to up-and-coming indie groups and small local bands alike. I enjoyed stopping in regardless of whether I was familiar with the bands playing on a given night. It was a great way to find new music and meet new people. One such new artist who captivated my attention then was Alix Olson, a lesbian slam poet who cut her teeth at the Nuyorican Café in New York City. Olson's work addressed issues related to radical leftist politics and sexuality in a manner that was captivating and infectious. As she performed her poem "Unsteady Things," she chanted her lines with the rhythm of her heartbeat, using car and driving metaphors to illustrate her lust and emotional disquiet alike. As the intensity of the piece builds, the rhythm quickens. She grabs the mic tighter, breathes deep, swallows, flexing her body, and rolling her hips, transitioning to sports metaphors to connect the poem's two central themes. It's hypnotic, as if she's casting a spell so that her body, desires, and anxieties become

ours too. We see her in ourselves and ourselves in the people around us, eroding the perceptions that isolate us in our own minds.

I remember another poem, "Daughter," about how we project our hopes on our children because we're afraid of the world, our past, and the future, so instead of doing anything about those fears, we find both subtle and direct ways to burden the next generation with the responsibility of making up for our shortcomings as we live vicariously through them, and in doing so, we create lenses through which young people see themselves and the world, often divorced from what they want and need. I think about my own childhood, feeling suffocated in a football jersey with a gaudy cross around my neck and having to live up to expectations that were never of my wanting. Olson, acknowledging the harm that this thinking causes, vows to not fall into this trap by "birthing [herself]." She uses bodily metaphors related to the childbirth, at times gruesome, to make visceral the pain, difficulty, joy, and freedom that come from acts of radical self-determination and the anxiety that comes with living beyond the social barriers that fit our lives to someone else's needs, to find some semblance of truth deep inside ourselves, to break it out, and release it into the world so it might blossom into something beautiful. I understood what she was saying, it resonated deeply with me as I thought about how I could never share my joys and desires with others, not even with my friends. I could only share what made me angry. It would take over 15 years before I'd find the strength to start living my own life openly, honestly, and to not hide from the world or myself any longer.

As "Daughter" closes, Olson, still maintaining the poem's rhythm, asks the audience to shout out the names of the women who came before us, women who paved

the way for us to live the lives we long to live. She keeps on chanting this line, "the women who came before", repeatedly. Again, it was hypnotic. People in the audience look at one another and to Olson on stage. And slowly, women start naming the names of other women who inspired them, women like Emma Goldman, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Patti Smith, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Bessie Smith, Kathleen Hanna, Kim Gordon, Bettie Page, Pauline Oliveros, and Laurie Anderson. The names the women shared inspired others, moving into more obscure realms of popular culture and academia. As a man, I felt it wasn't my place to participate. This moment was for them. Nevertheless, I thought of the gay men who helped shape me, men like David Wojnarowicz, Jean Genet, John Waters, and Carl Wittman whose lives led me to understand different ways of being outside of the reality and social roles constructed for me by my family, church, schooling, and the larger economic order. As I stayed silent, I watched the women around me smiling. Their eyes would light up and glisten when they'd hear the name of someone who had inspired them in their solitude. Each name shared was like a thread, and each connection between the women in the room weaved those threads together, building a new history, a new lineage that was electrifying and alive.

Olson's approach to her art and activism reminded me that this work can be playful, joyful, and fun while still being sharp, fierce, and critical. When Olson was onstage, squatting on the floor or pumping her fist in the air, the audience was enraptured in the moment, feeling the same energy, our hearts and breath synchronized in union, liberated from the limits of our individual minds. Like the mosh pits at house

shows, watching Olson perform at Solar Culture transcended the individual self to manifest a collective becoming, something my activist groups weren't able to achieve.

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About ten years later, I was living in Chicago as a recent college graduate, working as a bartender, and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I don't exactly remember how I first learned about Neighborhood Writing Alliance (NWA), a community writing nonprofit. I believe it was from my friend Ruth who organized mutual aid services with other sex workers, or it may have been from one of her friends. But I heard that NWA needed someone to facilitate poetry workshops at a halfway house for men reentering society from prison. As I mentioned earlier, for many people drawn to activism, myself included, our motives can be complicated and muddled. Perhaps my desire to be involved with this project had something to do with the AIDS crisis, which had profoundly shaped my worldview. At that time, many of the conversations among HIV/AIDS advocates centered around access to care in prison, and perhaps I saw this as a way to better understand the context surrounding incarceration and add to that conversation. Perhaps it related to the stigma I carried through the world as a result of my own experiences with medical institutions and a desire to connect with others who have experienced other forms of stigmatization. Perhaps it relates to traumatic experiences I've had in the past with the police, which deepened my distrust of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Perhaps I was still looking of a space where my experiences might be understood. Perhaps it was for all those reasons, even though I couldn't articulate any of that at the time.

St. Leonard's House was home to about 75 men who lived in two large dormitories. There was also an administrative office building and a community building where the cafeteria and chapel were located. It felt like a cross between a military barrack and a neglected WWII-era church. We held the poetry workshops in the basement of one of the dormitories, which also housed the laundry facilities and a very modest gym. The basement was always cold and musty. The water-damaged folding tables, chipped linoleum floors, and yellow florescent lighting made the space unwelcoming and uncomfortable. The workshop had always been required for anybody who was on campus, but that requirement was not enforced for the first few months of our meetings. The only people who came were guys who wanted to be there, usually about 3-10 writers. I liked it that way; I've never enjoyed facilitating a group or teaching students who were forced to be there. However, one day the people in charge decided to crack down on attendance. I remember arriving that morning with my head pounding and being faced with 40 or 50 guys waiting for me to teach them how to write poetry. I don't remember what that day's theme was or if there was a concept or a term that I wanted to explain, but not long after I started the workshop, a man stood up from his seat, visibly upset with his temples throbbing and obvious frustration in his voice. He asked me in crude terms how poetry could keep him sober. I had never been directly challenged like that before, but I held my own and pieced together a reply about the importance of emotional catharsis or something like that. The answer was good enough to appease him, and the workshop continued as normal with me on autopilot. I felt like a hypocrite. Being chemically dependent on substances myself, I was hardly one to talk about sobriety. Further, I was hardly one to talk about poetry or catharsis. While I could

speak fluently about Michel Foucault, Angela Davis, and social epistemic theories of rhetoric, hence beating out the other candidates for the position, whenever I tried to write poetry myself, my mind would be such a noisy, violent whirling of memories, heightened with intense anxiety and anger, that no coherent words would form, just a jumble of disconnected letters sown across the page.

Still, despite my perceived failures and shortcomings, I could tell that the poetry workshops did touch people's lives. While I don't think the program helped many people with sobriety, it did lead some writers to find a sense of pride in what they've learned from their journeys and mend broken family ties. It was a good program, and I wanted to see it continue. However, NWA ceased operations because of financial difficulties about a year and a half after I started facilitating workshops. Following the Great Recession, people just weren't donating as much money as they used to—or at least that's what the program director told us. As I learned about the closure and saw people react on social media, I felt an aching sadness in my heart knowing what would be lost. Every four months, NWA would publish the work that came out of the workshops, and writers, including some from St. Leonard's, would read their pieces at the Harold Washington Library in downtown Chicago. I remembered how writers would arrive in their best clothes, the joyful smiles from those evenings, the laughter, the hugs, and the homemade baked treats people would bring to share; and I remember how their faces would glow from seeing their work in print. If Alix Olson's performance back in Tucson showed the potential of creating a temporary world where people could find a sense of liberation from the structures that limit them, NWA shows what could happen when such a world is sustained over time. The world NWA created provided a strong sense of

community for writers who oftentimes had very little else, and without that structure in place, I had doubts as to whether that world, that community, could be sustained much longer.

Galvanized by NWA's closure, I wanted to learn how community literacy programs like NWA might build these kinds of smaller worlds where people could have the safety, privacy, and freedom to form a stronger sense of self that could become a foundation for other social identities to navigate the larger world. In the context of literacy studies, and education in general, the key goal is often to instill new skills and abilities, to expand upon what a writer already knows, and to guide them in becoming something new. While I don't take any issue with this, I do wonder how much of that process should involve the deconstruction of what came before. Early in a PhD program, my mind was still too disorganized for me to compose anything of coherence—unless I was writing in a mindset that was completely disconnected from my body and the lived experiences of my life. The lens through which I looked at the world—shaped by my past experiences within and outside of institutions—still created a distorted image of myself and the world around me, with no way of organizing the noise in my mind. It's difficult to instill new skills and abilities on such unstable foundation. The same was true from many writers I've met in the various community writing spaces over the years: people who desired a better life for themselves but yet struggled to make sense of their present and future due to a fragmented past which made learning and lasting change difficult to achieve.

For the men at St. Leonard's House, there were many institutional failures that led them to that basement, writing poetry, and fearing a relapse that would lead them

back to prison: parental neglect, domestic violence, ineffective schooling, the war on drugs, welfare reform, the cost of childcare, discriminatory and dismissive medical care, environmental pollution, decaying urban infrastructure, and the conditions of working-class jobs, not to mention the carceral system itself that responds to these prior failures by reifying further shame and stigma on their bodies through a range of dehumanizing practices. Each of these failures become embedded in each writer's narrative—the stories they tell themselves as they navigate the world—affecting how they understand society, their place in it, their relationship to other people, and ultimately how they identify possibilities for themselves and the people they are care about.

In an era when intuitional failures will become more prevalent, as the systems that shape society and affirm our identities will decay and breakdown, we need to develop ways to heal from the effects of those failures, to leave past identities behind, and to develop new ways of being in and understanding the world to enable us to best survive given the environmental, political, and systemic instability that will likely define the rest of our lives. Healing can take many forms, and various definitions and thresholds of healing vary between people, communities, cultures, and contexts. In the context of literacy studies, I've come to think of healing through the lens of identification. A person who has healed from past trauma is able to identify a path forward without that trauma getting in the way, whether directly or through avoidance. And one navigates that path forward through reading and writing. At this juncture, my interest is in developing theory to evaluate where best to enact practices to support healing from institutional failures, whether that's within an existing institution, in a community space that's deliberately removed as much as possible from any institution, or in some sort of

liminal space between the two. This question is complex, as it requires an understanding of how institutional failures shape identity; the kinds of writing-based pedagogical practices that might respond to institutional failures; how institutional influence could support or hinder those practices; and how people successfully enact new identities in new communities. As with the mosh pits of my youth, the process requires an undoing of what came before, perhaps at a visceral level. As with Alix Olson's performance, it requires us to understand our narratives and the narratives grounding our communities in new ways. And as with NWA, it requires a community where a new identity might be recognized and strengthened over time.

    As I started a PhD program to learn how to better teach writing in carceral spaces, I was invited to study an extracurricular spoken word and slam poetry program, which I'll call Radical Truth, at an institution that I'll call Seneca University. There were moments when Radical Truth's events, performances, and workshops had a similar energy and sense of community as the Alix Olson show: a collective way of being emerged that connected all the people in the room as time itself and the outside world ceased to exist. There were other moments in which Radical Truth's events felt more like St. Leonard's House on the morning when the administers decided to enforce attendance: participant engagement seemed forced and a sense of frustration felt awkwardly palpable. Some of Radical Truth's participants were well supported in the program and went on to earn Fulbright scholarships, attend prestigious graduate programs, and start literary publications, while in other cases, other participants experience neglect and, in rare instances, hostility. Nonetheless, Radical Truth is a good program; it sincerely touched many lives. But despite the program's best

intentions and laud-worthy successes, like any program, Radical Truth wasn't always able to meet its outcomes. Throughout the chapters that follow, I'll introduce the theoretical and methodological lenses I used to analyze Radical Truth and the interactions that took shape within its programmatic confines. In doing so, I identify how institutional mediation relates to the program's most affirming and most problematic moments. From that discussion, I hope to use Radical Truth as an example of the power community writing spaces have for transforming lives while developing strategies that facilitators and teachers might use to best avoid some of Radical Truth's programmatic challenges.

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Chapter 1, "Literacy, Identity, and Institutions," seeks to understand how institutions shape both individual and group identities and how literacy fits within that framework. Drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Bourdieu, I define an institution as a social group that organizes processes that reify abstractions, like beliefs and values, into individuals' subjectivities. Through institutional processes, abstract knowledge becomes embodied knowledge and people develop new ways of reading and responding to the world. It is through institutionalization that people develop a stable conception of reality that is mutually intelligible to others. Through putting Audre Lorde in conversation with Martin Heidegger, I define identity through the lens of identification to understand the relationship between embodied knowledge and how we focus our attention toward the future. From that understanding, defining our identities requires that we rise above social anxiety and fears of marginalization and rejection. Doing so allows us to identify new opportunities and be seen in different ways by those

around us. Institutional processes, when functional, simulate a similar kind of emotional overcoming, which enables people to embody new roles in the world.

Building off Arjun Appadurai, I define a community as a temporary, multidirectional social assemblage that responds to the same set of exigencies. It is through processes of institutionalization that people learn how to live in a shared reality with other people, enabling communities to form as living entities in response to the dynamics impacting daily life. However, past experiences in institutions alone don't account for how people focus attention and identify possibilities or how communities form. From a new materialist lens, grounded in the work of Jeff Ringer and Sean Morey, everything in a person's surroundings, human and non-human alike, affect how people engage in social contexts. Even physical structures like buildings carry institutional values, beliefs, and narratives that affect how people see themselves and the world around them. Every material object influenced by human activity reflects the technologies and institutionally sanctioned principles that shaped that object's becoming. Based on the Heideggerian concept of Dasein, we can understand how the values, beliefs, and narratives manifested in the spaces surrounding us can align, conflict, or influence the values, beliefs, and narratives we carry with us from the past, further influencing how we focus our attention and identify possibilities in the spaces we embody.

Adding another dimension to this discussion, institutions aren't always functional, and sometimes they fail. Whether through corruption, disorganization, incompetence, a lack of resources, or a lack of information, institutions can instill beliefs that are false, archaic, or privilege one group at the expense of another. Often enough,

particularly in this era of rapid change, institutions do not know what principles to instill to meet the emerging needs of society. Often when institutions fail, they enact draconian forms of punishment as a means of maintaining social order. In these cases, the principles instilled by the institution differ from people's embodied experiences in the world, leading to a gap between embodied knowledge and abstract knowledge. This can make the world appear bewildering; prevent people from building a stable sense of self; hinder people from being able to functionally participate in communities; and keep communities from being able to meet the demands of life. Given that we could be heading into an era of widespread institutional failures, it's more important than ever to build community spaces that can undo the effects of institutional violence and best provide people the support they need to thrive.

Chapter 2, "Scaling as a Feminist Methodology," seeks to build a methodology that can allow researchers to assess how the layering of institutional power influences how people engage with writing spaces, whether those spaces are located in institutional settings, community settings, or liminal spaces in between. Michelle LaFrance's institutional ethnography provides a method for identifying and analyzing institutional power structures in formal institutional settings where activities and identities are defined and oriented by official documents and processes. My methodology builds off LaFrance to identify institutional influence in community spaces or on the margins of an institution where identities and activities take shape in ways that are more living and organic. Like LaFrance, I base this methodology on standpoint theory as coined by Dorothy Smith and refined by Patricia Collins. If all knowledge is subjective and has meaning and relevancy in relation to how people are situated in

relation to intuitional influence—as established by Heidegger and Lorde—past experiences can influence what people notice about a space. From that understanding, the researcher's body becomes the site where ethnographic knowledge-making begins. For this reason, I call attention to what the researcher identifies in a space, what they remember, and how they build relationships with others. This is all data that can be connected to the institutional structures mediating the research site whether explicitly through rules and regulation, implicitly through programmatic outcomes and assessment practices, or indirectly through architecture, design, technology, or human geography.

However, analyzing how the researcher's body responds to the spaces they study is not enough to yield a rich, detailed understanding of how institutional influence affects how people engage with community writing programs. Drawing off the work of Jan Blommaert, my methodology rests on the foundation that society is both organized vertically in relation to hierarchies of power and horizontally in relation to polycentric points where social norms and culture are established. Using Blommaert's scalar theory, as advanced by Amy Stornaiuolo and Robert Jean LeBlanc, researchers can analyze shifts in language to determine how speakers and writers orient themselves to vertical power structures and horizonal centers of authority. Doing so can identity the specific ways communities and institutions influence how people use language in a given space. Taking this information in tandem with the feminist ethnographic methods I described earlier, researchers can develop a richer understanding of how institutional influence affects or limits the possibilities of a community writing program and how a

community writing program might change to better support the needs of the people it serves.

The chapter also introduces my research participants and discusses my data collection process. I explain how I use in vivo coding, per Johnny Saldaña, to arrive at the three codes I used to structure my analysis chapters. Finally, I define and give examples of those three codes: "radical truth," which I define as the practice of sharing an idea, derived from a lived experience, that's powerful enough to challenge the rhetorical commonplace in a given culture; "*the process becomes part of you*" relates to how identities are created through repeated social actions; and "living poetry" refers to the practice of using artmaking as a means of responding to the demands of life to build empathy and elicit social action.

Chapter 3, "Living Poetry: Meaning-Making in a Fragmented World," primarily serves to explain the three codes and describe Radical Truth's programmatic structure and pedagogy. I open the chapter with a discussion about Radical Truth's Opening Night Reception, the first event of the year when Daryll, the program director, welcomes back returning poets and hypes up the program for incoming first-year students. I give a detailed description of the building that houses the program, explaining how the modernist architecture and the murals in the stairwells transform the space and the mindsets of those who enter it, separating Radical Truth from the larger institution outside. To exemplify the concept of "living poetry," I explain how Daryll uses scalar shifts in his language and shares his own poetic work to redefine the kinds of relationships that form within Radical Truth. Daryll uses language to move away from the rigidly structured relationships that are defined in most formal institutional spaces

through contracts, policies, and procedures—which one might describe as "dead" because they are abstract and anchored in institutional prerogatives—to other forms of relationships grounded in reciprocity and vulnerability that are responsive to the changing, embodied social dynamics among the humans in this group, which one might refer to as "living."

In the middle of the chapter, I explain how Daryll organizes Radical Truth's weekly poetry workshops. I explain the concept of "radical truth" in relation to a poem that a participant wrote about the West African concept of "sankofa." The poem exemplifies how radical truth enables writers to access lived experiences and knowledges that exist outside rhetorical commonplaces, challenging and expanding the foundational beliefs and doxa that encompass a community. Also when discussing the workshops, I explain the concept of "the process becomes part of you" through describing a pedagogical technique Daryll uses to build writers' sense of confidence. Daryll occasionally instructs poets to stand in the middle of a circle and read a poem repeatedly while being provoked by other participants until there's a shift in the poet's disposition. While this method seems to be highly effective for participants due to the trust and care that Daryll has established with them, this practice would be highly problematic and dangerous to employ in a more formal educational context like the classroom.

Nonetheless, the dispositional shift that occurs from Daryll's practice of putting poets "in the middle" offers insight into how writing can potentially heal past trauma. In that discussion, I introduce two new concepts: "foundational narrative" and "dispositional narrative." Foundational narrative refers to the stories that we tell ourselves and others

as we navigate the world and understand our place in it. Dispositional narrative refers to the memories, stories, and emotions that have been inscribed into our physical bodies through muscle memory. To explain how we understand the world and our hopes, desires, and fears, both the foundational and dispositional narratives should be aligned. However, because of institutional failures, people will often shift their foundational narratives to conceal the dispositional narrative to avoid marginalization and stigmatization. In more direct terms: we learn to tell our stories in ways that aren't entirely true out of fear of being judged, which keeps us from realizing our potential and what we need to thrive. Because of this, simply learning how to retell our stories is often not enough to beget deep emotional healing; we need to recondition our bodies. While I'd be hesitant to recommend the practices that Daryll employs in writing workshops, I hope this study will inspire others to explore more alternative ways to explore dispositional and foundational narratives in a way that would be more ethically appropriate in a wide range of educational contexts.

Chapter 4, "If They See That, They'll Destroy Us: Structural Change and the Politics of Inclusivity," seeks to connect what I've learned from working with Radical Truth to contemporary questions around inclusivity. While the value of inclusivity is an obvious assumption in the field of community literacy studies, discussions about the concept are usually framed within the context of making predominantly white spaces more equitable and accessible. Given that Radical Truth is an unapologetically Black space, I pose the question of whether Radical Truth is bound by the same imperative for inclusivity. I ground this question in an analytical lens developed by Patricia Collins and advanced by Natasha Jones to assess the inclusiveness of a space by understanding

how infrastructure, ideology, disciplinary practices, and interpersonal connections are interconnected in a given context (Jones 6). The chapter applies Jones' framework to two Radical Truth events: Hiya China, a hybrid in-person/virtual open mic hosted in partnership with a high school in China, and the Mic Drop Poetry Slam, to show how the structure of the events, including institutional and technological mediation, affect who is privileged, who is marginalized, and why that matters in relation to Radical Truth's pedagogical goals.

In the second half of the chapter, I explain how Radical Truth had become more inclusive and welcoming of LGBT/queer[1] students as a means of showing how any writing space might change to better meet the needs of more diverse participants. I tell the story of a participant whom I call Carla. Carla uses they/them pronouns; they are Black, Dominican American, nonbinary, and queer. When Carla and I were new to the program, many administrators in the Office of Multicultural Matters held problematic homophobic attitudes that went unchallenged in workshop spaces that were generally dominated by heterosexual, cis-gender participants. Carla found belonging in Radical Truth by exploring the similarities and differences between their experience as a Dominican American and other poets' experiences as African Americans. But overtime, Carla began to use the space to ask difficult questions about gender and sexuality while sharing powerful personal stories, which led participants and administrators to rethink prior assumptions about gender and sexuality. Moreover, Carla's story is significant because it represents how they use all three of concepts grounding this study (radical

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[1] Through this project, I use the terms that my participants use to describe their identities and communities. While the term "queer" can have many meanings from one context to the next and the term LGBT is problematically limiting, I use both of these terms interchangeably.

truth, the process becomes part of you, and living poetry) to facilitate that change in their own personal identity and in Radical Truth's collective culture.

I end the chapter and the study with a set of suggestions on how to build more inclusive spaces across contexts: 1) use scalar analysis to more specifically describe how infrastructure, ideology, disciplinary practices, and interpersonal interactions influence one another with regard to shaping an inclusive culture; 2) understand how institutional proximity can support or limit what's possible with regard to the inclusiveness of a space; and 3) use the concept of the radical truth to bring about institutional change by challenging core cultural assumptions.

1. Literacy, Identity, and Institutional Mediation

The Function of the Institution

This dissertation serves to articulate a way in which community-based writing research and institutional change might inform one another in tandem to foster stronger institutions and more resilient communities in this time of intense cultural, economic, and technological change. While the work of James Porter et al. and Michelle LaFrance offers a way of connecting micro-level material concerns to macro-level power structures, the scope of this project still requires a means of differentiating institutions from communities and theorizing how they function separately and in relation to each other.

According to Gilles Deleuze, institutions are social organizations that instill principles, which I understand as foundational beliefs about the world, that enable people to read and respond to their surroundings intelligibly to others. Through this socialization, collaboration becomes possible and communities emerge *ad hoc* in response to exigencies and dissipate in time once those exigencies subside. In "Instincts and Institutions," Deleuze claims that institutions function as an "organized system of means" that equate instinct with social purpose, which in turn allows people to express desire in ways that have value within social contexts (19). For example, the processes through which one creates intellectual property in a doctoral program could stand in proxy for the desire to forcibly mark physical territory. Through this process of abstraction, one's own personal motives for participating in an institution—if that participation is voluntary—become intelligible to others. While beliefs about the world can also be learned through being in the world, this kind of learning can often be

dangerous. Because institutions provide means for people to exercise instincts through

abstracted procedures, institutional activities occur in a manner that's safe and rarely a

matter of life and death. Furthermore, without the socialization that occurs through

institutional processes, people often encounter challenges when articulating what

they've learned outside of institutional contexts. For instance, experienced merchants

on the black market may understand many principles of supply chain economics, but

that knowledge isn't often respected or understood outside their immediate

communities.

Deleuze argues that institutions—when they function as designed—provide

opportunities through which base instincts might be flexed through "procedures of

satisfaction" (20). As an example, the primary institution is the family, and through

engaging with primary caregivers, infants learn how to read, respond, and adapt to their

surroundings in ways that support their survival. Deleuze differentiates secondary

institutions, such as the church and state, from the family because these institutions

assume a prior level of socialization (19). For instance, kindergartens take for granted

that children have already learned to recognize figures of authority in the home. For our

discussion, in the context of institutions of higher education, we can see how our work

centers around administering procedures of satisfaction: from the undergraduate

admissions process to awarding tenure and distinguishing honors to effective faculty

members, to conducting assessments for accreditation, we create programs and

processes that evoke fear among those who participate in those programs and

processes. Through the process of reckoning that fear, with the theoretical and

technological tools and resources provided by the institution, participants, whether they

be first-year students or department chairs, internalize beliefs about the world. Once the

process is over and participants experience a sense of relief and satisfaction, they

emerge with an evolved sense of identity as they're able to read and respond to the

situations impacting their lives differently.

Deleuze continues to claim that these procedures of satisfaction that institutions

orchestrate function as "positive [models] for action" (19). It's important to note here that

Deleuze is not placing a value judgement on institutional activities or arguing that

institutions are necessarily good. Rather, the term *"positive"* emphasizes that institutions

don't seek to inhibit desire *directly*. For instance, while degree requirements and

learning outcomes set boundaries for our work in institutions of higher education, and

we are still free to navigate the institution in accord with our own free will and design

courses and mentor students however we best see fit. Even prisons, which are clearly

restrictive, portray themselves as organized means for positive action through the

rhetoric of rehabilitation. Obviously, institutions can certainly be oppressive, and that

oppression, as Deleuze explains, becomes apparent when institutions do not know

which principles to instill and thus enact rules and laws to restrict liberty (20). As such,

actions that seek to inhibit action could be qualified as *negative*. If an institution cannot

instill principles to guide social action, it enforces rules to limit it. For instance, a writing

instructor might ban the use electronic devises or enact draconian plagiarism policies if

they are not supported by guiding principles and corresponding best practices for

managing technology in the classroom or teaching students about intellectual property.

Or, as we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, state governments set strict

limits on commerce and mobility when they did not have the principles needed to manage the spread of disease.

Theories from cultural anthropology can further explain how processes of institutionalization condition people to respond to exigencies collaboratively through inscribing ways of reading their surroundings. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* an ethnography about the Kabyle people of the Atlas Mountains, Pierre Bourdieu defines the term "habitus" as a set of internalized principles that correspond to the dispositions that enable people to fluidly read and respond to the world without cognitive reflection (78). Bourdieu's analysis indicates that institutionalized Kabyle rituals coinciding with the changing seasons, such as the slaughter of an ox to signify the new year, would result in dispositional changes regarding gender roles and the times and places people would work and socialize (130-132). Through participating in these rituals, people would internalize principles informing best practices for the new roles in the new season. Cultural practices, which stem from those rituals, as Bourdieu claims, represent "a dialectic of the internalization of the externality and an externalization of internality" (72). This connects with Carolyn Miller's understanding of situations, which she defines as "social constructs that are the result, not of *perception,* but of *definition*" (156). In other words, through institutional processes, people develop common ways of communicating so personal thoughts and experiences can be intelligible to others.

Again, this institutional socialization allows groups of people to organize and respond to agreed-upon social exigencies and not the forces of nature alone. A contemporary parallel would be the academic calendar and how the various rituals in the academy, including deliberately timed listserv emails from department chairs and

deans, requests for tenure letters, midterm exams, and calls for award nominations,

function to shift dispositions in relation to production and rest. As dispositions shift

through institutional, ritualized prompting, we identify different roles for ourselves that

correspond to various activities both on and off campus. Surely, these roles and

dispositions related to other institutional power dynamics outside of academia—for

instance, academic labor contracts tend to be negotiated at the same time tax forms are

filed. Likewise, the academic calendar reflects the liturgical calendar of the Catholic

Church, a prior institution that has profoundly influenced the structure of the university.

In the context of this study, understanding processes of institutionalization allows me to

analyze how the experiences of Radical Truth participants in the past—particularly with

regard to matters of race, gender, and sexuality—relate to how they're engaging with

various campus and community spaces and how Radical Truth supports their

education.

 Processes of institutionalization not only shape personal subjectivities but group

identities as well. Arjun Appadurai claims that principles are "inscribed" onto individual

subjects through repeated cultural processes, which, as they become normalized,

become the bases through which group identities become articulated (14-15). Again,

reflecting Deleuze and Bourdieu, Appadurai's work indicates that as we repeatedly and

systematically engage power dynamics—and in turn exercise instinctual, emotional

responses—through institutional activities, our bodies internalize and become

accustomed to routines. Similar to how children might adjust their eating and sleeping

routines to adapt to a parent's work schedule, through my studies as a graduate

student, I came to internalize the academic calendar and develop an externalized

identity in relation to that calendar. As the days start becoming noticeably shorter in August, I feel myself being pulled toward campus and my mind, in a way that seems almost instinctual, gravitates toward course revisions and I begin to spend afternoons in coffee shops. By no coincidence, at that time of year, I regularly run into colleagues participating in similar activities.

Based on the formation of group identities through institutional processes, people can collectively respond to the exigencies impacting our lives in a coherent mutually intelligible manner. Carolyn Miller's article "Genre as Social Action" defines exigence as "an objectified social need" (157). Exigences don't have meaning in and of themselves, but instead they exist in the rhetorical space between individuals in social contexts, hence the term's function in rhetorical theory. An exigence is neither the Disaster, alluding to Maurice Blanchot, which destroys cultural imaginaries by unraveling the beliefs that scaffold the worlds we collectively construct; and neither is it one's own personal emotional reactions to the external stimuli. Rather, as Miller claims, exigencies "must be located in the social world, neither in a private perception nor in material circumstance" (157). This distinction positions exigence as a sort of metaphorical hinge connecting the individual with the social. As such, what affects an individual's emotional state only becomes an exigence once it gains meaning in relation to other people—a community. As a result, Miller argues, "the exigence provides the rhetor with a socially recognizable way to make his or her intentions known. It provides an occasion, and thus a form, for making public our private versions of things" (158). Miller's understanding of exigence, genre, and communication connects to questions of identity. To Miller, communicating effectively with others requires that those involved in any context have

experienced is a similar degree of institutionalization, but even so, effective communication requires the right kind of identification regarding how to shape and employ genres. From this framework, researchers can understand how identities emerge and change in relation to institutional power and community involvement, with genre as a conceptual hinge to connect the two. In the context of Radical Truth, understanding Miller's concept of genre in relation to Deleuze, Bourdieu, and Appadurai can help us understanding how slam poetry as a genre functions to build individual and group identities within the space itself, which can drive action elsewhere.

To exemplify the connection between institutionalization and identify formation further, Dwight Conquergood's essay "Health Theater in a Hmong Refugee Camp" demonstrates how principles are inscribed into subjectivities through institutional procedures. The Hmong, an ethnic group indigenous to the mountains of Laos, were displaced in the 1980s and relocated to a crowded refugee camp in Thailand as an indirect result of the Vietnam War. Because the Hmong traditionally lived in small, isolated family groups there was no need to develop institutionalized procedures to instill the principles that would beget the necessary sanitation practices to maintain a healthy environment in a crowded refugee camp. As a result, many Westerners who worked in the camp thought the Hmong to be intrinsically dirty or stupid, which resulted in dehumanizing practices in camp clinics. Conquergood responded to this by instituting a theater program to instill the necessary principles of sanitation. Through participating in dramatic activities while singing songs with lyrics such as "If you play in the jungle/The Tiger will bite you/If you don't wash your hands, face, and body/You will fall ill," the people who lived in the camp were able to develop dispositions that allowed

them to identify ways of addressing sanitation in a way that was culturally relevant

(152). Because the Tiger represents a cultural signifier that evokes an embodied sense

of fear that's installed through existing cultural practices, Conquergood's dramatic

performances allowed people to associate certain pathogens related to poor sanitation

with their existing dispositions toward danger.

Conquergood claims that identity is "a performance in process" and not "a

postulate, premise, or ordinary principle" (89). As principles are inscribed into our

subjectivities through institutional procedures, people learn how to identify themselves

in relation to the world in a way that's intelligible to others who have undergone the

same forms of institutional socialization and conditioning. Because people identify roles

in relation to prior conditioning, social groups form in response to emerging exigencies

ad hoc. The prefix '*per*' in *performance* means *through*. As we pass through intuitions,

identities form in relation to the principles inscribed through institutional conditioning and

the ideologies and embodied experiences people bring to the institution. Because

people enter secondary intuitions with different motives and ideologies, shaped by their

prior experience in the world, people emerge from the same processes with different

identities.

Amy Devitt similarly understands each individual enactment of a genre as a

performance of identity. Drawing off Miller's work, Devitt claims that genre emerges

from cultural contexts (*Writing Genres* 25). If genres serve as forms through which the

private is made accessible and intelligible to the public, which enables communication

and collaboration, generic forms are shaped by the institutional processes and

corresponding inscribed principles that facilitate the emergence of culture. Because

people undergo institutional processes for different reasons, have different experiences from prior institutionalization, and because the situation surrounding an exigence is always shifting, Devitt argues that no two representations of a genre are ever the same; each are unique performances of an identity.

If institutions function to instill principles through which people can read the world around them and respond to the exigencies affecting their lives, a community is a group of people, encompassed by a common identity, that is affected by the same set of exigencies, which they respond to with a common set of genres. While institutions strive for permanence, communities are temporary and multidirectional. However, not all institutions function as intended. If an institution is effective, it would instill the principles that people need to respond to exigencies impacting life. Institutions fail if they're not able to instill the principles, beliefs, and values that communities need to be able to respond to the demands of the world. Given the rapid speed of change impacting our world: climate change, mass migration, automation, artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, misinformation, cyber insecurity, and biogenetic engineering, institutional failures may very well become common. Due to this reality, this dissertation serves to provide a frame for understanding how institutional failures will shape identity and literacy in our most vulnerable communities, which could guide our efforts regarding institutional change or the creation of community spaces for healing in response to such failures.

Temporary Multidirectional Communities

My understanding of community, as a temporary multidirectional social group that emerges in response to a core set of exigencies and operates with a shared set of evolving genres, is different from how the term is commonly used in writing studies research. As this section shows, most researchers theorize community through the lenses of the discourse community or the community of practice, which are both insufficient given the scope and purpose of this project.

The idea of a discourse community assumes that communities center around an ideological commonality, which is evident in common language practices. Louis Althusser defines ideology as the imagined worldview people create to understand their surroundings (109), and from this definition, Althusser defines discourse as the means through which that imagined conception of reality shapes the material world (114). The central idea here is that we create what we imagine. If one understands the world to exist as part of an orderly universe, one will likely create orderly systems; if one understands reality as random chaos, one will produce random chaos. In 1982 Patricia Bizzell wrote an article titled "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty" in which she used the term *discourse community* to understand the social-epistemic context of writing based on the assumption that a shared worldview was the central force structuring communities and establishing standards of quality and competency. Later that decade in 1988, John Swales published an article to expand Bizzell's claims through analyzing a group of stamp collectors through the lens of a discourse community. Bizzell refuted Swales' understanding of the term on the basis that there is no ideological commonality unifying stamp collectors (Academic Discourse). Around the same time, James Paul Gee published his theory of Discourse in a book-length piece published in the *Journal of*

Education titled "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics." Gee capitalizes Discourse to differentiate his understanding of the term from how it's commonly used in linguistics, as a specific sample of text or speech; rather, Gee claims a Discourse is a metaphorical "identity kit" centered around particular "saying (writing)—doing—being—valuing—believing combinations" (6-7). While based on a similar premise as Bizzell's lens, Gee's delineation of community, based on his theory of Discourse, is a bit more amorphous. Instead of seeing discourse as a center of gravity holding a community together, Discourse is a means of identifying others with similar beliefs, values, and experiences through semiotic recognition.

As a conceptual lens, the idea of a discourse community has been critiqued due to its limited, simplistic scope. The earliest was a sharply-written 1989 *CCC* article by Joseph Harris titled "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing." In the piece, Harris criticized his contemporaries, specifically Bizzell, Swales, and David Bartholomae, for advancing an overly vague, nondescript understanding of discourse and overusing the term *community* to the point where it has become nothing more than "an empty sentimental word…[meaning] little more than a nicer, friendlier, fuzzier version of what came before" (13). Harris's frustration centers around the monolithic ways others would write about discourse, as if "the academic discourse community" exists as a singular entity and not as plurality of competing stakeholders (15). While not as strongly worded as Harris's article, Paul Prior offered a noteworthy critique of the discourse communities lens in 2003 arguing that it fails to address the inherent heterogeneity and ideological diversity that exists within any community. As a solution, Prior argues for a "laminated" understanding of community because social groups are comprised of multiple

worldviews *and* those worldviews are constantly in flux as people move across the various spaces they inhabit (15).

Because of these critiques, a discourse-focused lens would be quite limiting for understanding the role Radical Truth plays in supporting students as they grow as writers. Radical Truth is diverse many ways. Poets represent a range of racial, ethnic, and religious groups; many poets identify as LGBT; and moreover, regional differences and variation regarding socio-economic class further intersect these broad identity categories. Some poets may identify as male in some spaces and female in others; some may only be selectively out as gay, lesbian, or transgender; others embody complicated racial and ethnic identities that affect their lives in different ways in different places. No singular worldview or ideology—even from a broad understanding those terms—could begin to encapsulate the ideological diversity of the group.

Due to these limits of discourse communities, the trend in Writing Studies has since been to delineate communities through various cultural-historical theories of education stemming from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. In the early 1930s, Vygotsky noted a phenomenon in which children developed impressive critical reasoning skills after learning specialized vocabulary to describe the world around them. Vygotsky theorized that the specialized vocabulary enabled those children to develop new ways of cooperating with their peers, and from that cooperation the children developed a *zone of proximal development* (187). While the writing is a bit ambiguous, it appears that Vygotsky used the term as something a person has that distinguishes them from others at the same stage of maturity. In other words, through collaborating in proximity of others, one is capable of functioning at a higher level of cognitive

development. As other scholars have expanded Vygotsky's research, the term has developed new meanings and has been used in new ways. For example, contemporary education researchers like King Beach and Kris Gutiérrez understand the zone of proximal development to be something that students *encounter* and not something students *have*. Beach asserts that cohorts of students undergo a form of mediation as they transition through zones of proximal development with an experienced teacher; the students then emerge from the zone with the skills needed to perform a new identity in an outside space (118). Gutiérrez similarly understands the zone of proximal development to be a space in which learners can find membership in a new community through the process of working with a mentor who helps them understand how their personal histories align with the social histories of that new community (152-153). Gutiérrez asserts that zones of proximal development could function as "third spaces" in which people may blend discourses in a way that enables them to participate in a wider range of spaces.

While Vygotsky and the contemporary practitioners of his work understand and use the zone of proximal development differently, for our purposes of qualifying a community, that difference matters little. In all three cases, the zone of proximal development involves a novice learner undergoing a form of mediation from which the learner can identify new possibilities for action in the world. Finnish education theorist Yrjö Engeström first noted this triangulation, which became the basis for his articulation of activity theory. In his 1987 book *Learning by Expanding*, Engeström asserts that human social activity functions in the context of activity systems in which subject positions, object positions, and conceptions of community are mediated by the

perpetual interplay between commonly agreed upon rules, divisions of labor, and tools; together, these six systematic components are oriented toward a future goal. Resonating with Adam Smith's invisible hand theory of free-market economics, Engeström's activity theory involves people refining technology, reifying core beliefs, and reaffirming communal roles simultaneously as they work toward an end that is never quite realized. In terms of delineating the contours of community, Engeström's activity theory places social configurations explicitly within systems of production and consumption, ultimately functioning to allocate and manage resources.

Drawing from Engeström's articulation of activity theory, Swiss education theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term *community of practice* in their 1991 book *Situated Learning*. Wegner then continued to develop the concept further in his 1998 book *Communities of Practice* to expand on the term's applications in the workplace. In brief, this model for understanding community assumes that social groups are governed by shared practices and those practices form the foundation from which those social groups determine the value of resources and standards of competency. This stands in contrast to Bizzell's discourse community and Gee's Discourse being its collaborative action itself that serves to sustain a community and not a shared imagination or ideology. In 1997, David Russell's article "Rethinking Genre in School and Society" synthesized Engeström's activity theory with Charles Bazerman's 1994 articulation of genre theory to argue that genres exist as technologies, governed by discursive values, within activity systems, and by this notion, learning to write requires one to learn the rules and conventions of specific activity systems.

Several key studies in Writing Studies have used the communities of practice/activity theory framework to analyze how community involvement relates to writing practices. To summarize a handful of those, Elizabeth Wardle's article "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces" uses Russell's understanding of activity theory to analyze the failures of a recent college graduate who couldn't quite transition into the white-collar world post-graduation. Kevin Roozen's 2008 article "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing" uses Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development to explain how a first-year college student recovered from a failing midterm in a speech class by applying the skills he developed through his involvement in various extracurricular activities. Shannon Carter used Lave and Wenger's *Situated Learning* as a lens for understanding the composition practices of basic writers in her 2008 book *The Way Literacy Lives*. Carter argues that by providing basic writers with "legitimate peripheral participation" within a community of practice, writers could develop the ability to apply skills in other contexts; Carter coins the term *rhetorical dexterity* to describe this cross-contextual application of learning (125). Rebecca Nowacek's 2011 book *Agents of Integration* expands upon Wenger's notion of brokering from *Communities of Practice.* Nowacek, arriving at similar conclusions as Carter, claims that as people move between various communities of practice, they serve as "brokers" who influence the practices of one community by readapting the skills they learned in another; Nowacek sees this brokering as the basis for knowledge transfer.

Unlike the discourse communities' lens, the communities of practice theory and the cultural-historical theories of education that support it provide a way of

understanding the inevitable ideological diversity within any group of people, but it has

been critiqued in two ways that are important given the context of this study. First, while

the communities of practice model accounts for variation in term of participants' beliefs

and worldviews, the lens assumes a naïve homogeneity in terms of the motives

underlying social practice. While Russell introduced activity theory to Writing Study, he

also critiqued the scope of its use. In 2003, Russell and Arturo Yañez published an

article titled "Big Picture People Rarely Become Historians" analyzing the experiences

of students in a required general-education history class. Russell and Yañez claim that

any activity system exists within a complex, interconnected web of oftentimes conflicting

values, intentions, and motives, which is why activity theory should be seen as a

heuristic that "offers tentative explanations" and not "a neat way to predict outcomes" (n.

pg). In addition, in response to the capitalist orientation of the theory, Gee wrote a piece

in 2000 titled "New People in New Worlds" to challenge the communities of practice

model on the grounds that it only accounts for social practices that have utility value.

Based on this premise, Gee warns that building a pedagogy based on the notion of a

community of practice could serve as a vector for neoliberal ideologies to

problematically influence our teaching practices. While I use *Communities of Practice*

when teaching professional writing and I find it to be a useful tool for understanding

situations that necessitate efficient, precise communication, I'm not sure if a utilitarian

purpose lies at the heart of every community or every activity within a community. St.

Thomas Aquinas, for instance, wrote that fear, intoxication, lust, and the desire for truth

are all motives for action yet those motivating factors don't always amount to utilitarian

goals. More recently, Gilles Deleuze argues that beauty can be a motive for action that

doesn't have quantifiable utility (Instincts and Institutions 20). Furthermore, if the function of the institution is to instill principles, the activities of the institution do not need to orient toward a predetermined outcome; whereas if communities emerge in response to an exigence or a set of exigencies, outcomes matter more.

The Institutional Mediation of Literacy and Identity

As a classroom teacher, I'm interested in how institutions support students in constructing new identities that support their needs and desires. But the college classroom isn't the only space where I teach. As a community writing researcher, I'm interested in the role that community writing spaces have in supporting healing after institutionally inflicted violence and other forms of institutional failure. As part of this inquiry, I'm interested in theorizing how institutional failures shape identity, which begs the question of what an institutional failure is in the first place. There are many ways institutions can fail, and for the purpose of this project, I've identified three:

- Inability to function or meet the needs of society due to incompetence, disorganization, or a lack of resources, such as toxic drinking water from aging infrastructure and government indifference or the gutting non-vocational university programs in response to state budget cuts.
- Inability to identify or agree on what principles to instill, such as a government agency that cannot balance climate policy with economic growth, resulting in inertia; or a university that cannot agree on a generative AI policy, resulting in students receiving mixed messages about academic integrity.

- Inability to maintain cultural legitimacy, such as the dwindling membership numbers in some mainline Protestant churches or shifts in public attitudes toward the US Supreme Court following the *Dobbs* decision.

In the context of writing studies, my intent is to piece together a theoretical lens that could allow people to identify how institutional failures influence the ways people read and respond to the world—or, in other words, the formation of identities—which could then guide both curricular or policy reforms within institutional spaces or the creation of community-based infrastructure and programming outside the institution depending on the nature and severity of the failure. I understand this project to be one step toward that larger goal. In the last section of this chapter, I described the relationship between institutions and communities; how the principles emphasized in the prior correlate to the day-to-day functions of the latter. In this section, my intent is to review literature concerning literacy and identity to unpack how these concepts are intertwined; the affordances and limitations of various conceptualizations of both; and how they relate to my ways of understanding institutions and communities. This will then lay the foundation for my work in the next chapter for a methodology to study the ways institutional powers mediates writing spaces, which I hope could help guide both institutional reform and the creation of community writing sites to address the effects of institutional failures alike.

Radical Truth is housed in Seneca University's Office of Multicultural Matters. While Radical Truth is an accepting, open, inclusive space, the program is first and foremost designed to support students of color. Because ethnic identity is a foundational aspect of Radical Truth's programming, studying the literacy practices of its participants

means situating identity and literacy in the context of how students from minority racial and ethnic groups engage with the university. This relates to notions of institutional failures because institutions in the US have historically neglected the needs of Black Americans (or worse), which affects how many Black people understand their positionality in relation to the university today. Even still, understanding how race and ethnicity function in the university is complicated. Yes, minority students do experience real challenges in institutional spaces that other students from more traditionally-served backgrounds do not, yet it would be a mistake to see the experiences of minority students through an overly simplistic understanding of oppression that doesn't account for the nuanced, ever-shifting ways layers of institutional power operate and the creative ways people manage to survive (and in some cases thrive) in response to or in spite of those power dynamics. As we know from research on colorblind racism, when we avoid discussions about race, we also avoid acknowledging the material conditions that affect the lives of people of color and the institutional processes and policies that beget those conditions, which permits societal injustices to continue unchecked (Bonilla-Silva). On the other hand, talking about race and racial injustices in abstract, overarching, totalizing ways could add to the institutional violence that people of color experience. Indeed, racism and oppression take different forms in different contexts, and we should be careful in how we qualify identity and analyze the institutional injustices related to identity so those of us working in academia are neither oblivious to injustice nor inadvertently perpetuate the injustices we claim we want to alleviate. To do so, we need a framework to understand race and ethnicity beyond institutionally sanctioned and embedded categories. While Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality explains

how institutional power structures create such categories and how these categories relate to one another in complex ways to create various macro-level social phenomena, if our object of study is writing and literacy, we must go a step further to derive a theory of identity that explains how individuals identify ways of reading and responding to the world in specific situations. If we understand that students from minority groups experience unique challenges in higher education but also have agency regarding how they respond to those challenges, such a theory might help illuminate the root causes of both. By identifying those root causes in specific contexts, we could move beyond one-dimensional critiques to derive a framework that might guide nuanced, focused institutional change.

And again, given the precarity that defines our world in this present age, previously stable identities are also in flux. If the rate of cultural change continues to accelerate due to climate change, political instability, and innovations in information technology, automation, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance, we will all need to learn how to live without a fixed sense of identity. Appadurai warns that violence provides temporarily stability when identity is unstable (*Fear of Small Numbers* 7). While Appadurai makes his argument in the context of Islamic terrorism, the same idea could be applied to a larger range of less violent acts from self-destructive behaviors to microaggressions in the workplace. The point I'm trying to make here is that given the likely trajectory of late capitalism, it's important to understand how institutional failures relate to identity if we want to maintain peace in our homes and communities. Because writing and literacy are so closely interlinked, the teaching of writing may prove to be an important tool for helping people identify themselves in relation to these greater cultural

changes. At least that's what I'm trying to do in my own writing classes, and I hope that the theoretical lenses I'm assembling in this chapter could guide me and other writing teachers in this endeavor.

Situating Literacy

Literate practices are cultural practices that relate to reading and writing. By referring to literate practices as cultural practices, I situate literacy within material ecologies, where culture takes shape from how people engage with their physical surroundings. In such ecologies, both the humans involved and the physical spaces around them are mediated by specific technologies and institutional power. If institutions instill the principles and beliefs through which we internalize an imagined reality, it's through institutional processes that we're able to communicate that understanding of reality to others through genres. If genre leads to social action, and literacy relates to our ability to understand and craft genres of written communication to successfully evoke social action, we can see that literacy could have either an institutional or a communitive function. The institutional function of literacy through mediatization creates cultural imaginaries through which we understand the world (Agha). Furthermore, the institutional process, and the technologies through which those processes inscribe subjectivities, also determines what's possible regarding the available means of persuasion in any context. This limits the scope of what's possible in regard to social action in any context. The communicative function of literacy, per activity theory, is a goal-oriented activity that emerges in response to exigencies, which we're able to name due to processes of institutionalization.

To situate this project within conversations in literacy studies, it's first necessary to define how the term has been used in the field in the past. Brian V. Street's work outlines two conceptualizations of literacy. The first, which Street refers to as the autonomous model of literacy, understands literacy to be a set of skill that, when mastered, enhances a learner's cognitive abilities and enables greater employment opportunities and fuller participation in civic life (1). Street labels the autonomous model of literacy as such because it assumes literate learning happens autonomously, because of an individual's drive, commitment, and dedication, and does not consider the social, economic, political, and material dynamics that created such an environment where the learner was unable to develop literacy earlier in life. This notion of literacy, which is often associated with vocational training and conservative discourses of self-sufficiency, has also been criticized by many other scholars in literacy studies, even if it is not named specifically. For example, J. Elspeth Stucky's book *The Violence of Literacy*, critiques this autonomous, skill-focused conception of literacy education as being a product of capitalism that prioritizes the needs of institutions over those of actual disenfranchised communities, which thus further marginalizes those communities while leaving individual learners straddled with debt and no better off than they were before.

As a foil to the autonomous model of literacy, Street presents the ideological model of literacy, which frames literacy as a "social practice" that is "embedded in socially constructed principles" rather than a "technical and neutral skill" (2). From this view, we see literacy as being a part of culture, which emerges from a set of practices, derived from instilled principles, in a particular social context situated in space and time.

The ideological model of literacy doesn't replace the autonomous model of literacy per se, but rather it positions vocational and workplace-oriented literacies as being just some of the many literacies through which people read and respond to the world around them.

Today, the Street's ideological model is aligned with how most scholars understand literacy and connect literacy to identity. For example, grounded in the assumption that social practices defining literacy vary from context to context, Shannon Carter advocate for multiliteracy pedagogies that enable learners to adapt literate skills across contexts and situations; she calls this skill "rhetorical dexterity" (19). Jonathan Alexander's book *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* asserts that matters of identity, including sexuality, are constructed by discourse, and as such, understanding and expressing identity is tied to context-specific literate practices. Similarly, drawing a similar connection between literacy and identity, Elaine Richardson's book *Hiphop Literacies* uses literacy as a lens to explore how Black hiphop artists use language to expose and critique racist, exploitive practices in the entertainment industry while simultaneously engaging with that same industry to develop their own art and advance their careers.

While scholarship in literacy studies has long focused on the relationship between literacy, identity, and institutional power, that work continues to grow in nuance as researchers learn how to better analyze social contexts. Emphasizing this point, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's article "Moving Literacies" challenges the prevailing assumption in education that literacy skills necessarily equate to increased social capital for learners. Rather, Lorimer Leonard's research indicates that how people can recall

literacy skills is determined by context (14). In her study, Leonard interviews 25

immigrant participants from 17 countries throughout the world to understand how

"movement itself—among languages and locations—[affects, changes, or produces]

certain literacy practices" (17). Leonard's participants are diverse in terms of their socio-

economic status in the United States as well in their home countries. Some of her

participants, such as one she calls Alicia, an Argentine woman who initially arrived in

United States to study at a prestigious liberal arts college, have enjoyed quite a bit of

upward mobility due to their multilingual skills (23). However, other participants were not

as lucky. Speaking to this, Leonard gives the example of a participant whom she calls

Faridah who enjoyed a comfortable middle-class lifestyle as a high-school teacher and

journalist in Algeria but struggled to get by in the United States as a laborer (29). A third

participant, whom she refers to as Tashi, a well-educated Tibetan woman from India,

was lauded for her multilingual abilities in Asia but experienced stigma and disciplinary

action for applying those same skills while studying nursing in the United States (25).

Taking these experiences together as a whole, Leonard concludes that "it is not

background or skills that sufficiently explains the variable trajectories of these

writers…instead, the effect of these literate practices is unstable because their value

shifts according to the social field the writers encounter" (30-31). This insight into how

literacy functions is important in the context of this project. If Leonard's participants

encounter varying degrees of success accessing and employing their repertoire of

literate and linguistic skills based on the institutional and social context of their lives, and

irrespective of their prior learning, it would follow that that the same phenomenon would

affect domestic writing students as well. After all, we are all positioned differently vis-à-

vis different constellations of institutional power and in relation to different sets of community goals. For this reason, it's important that we develop more precise methods for identifying how institutional power affects not only how we learn but how we use that knowledge from space to space, and perhaps more importantly, be able to identify how institutional failures affect how we identify ourselves in relation to the outside world and thus how we write. In the following section, I'll explain how theories of identity could enable us to do just that.

Situating Identity

"Identity" could be theorized in many different ways: as a unique essence that supposedly exists at core of each individual; as a performance; as a principled or an affective disposition through which people respond to their surroundings; as a set of categories that situate people in relation to societal institutions; as the result of technological mediation on individual subjectivities; as a limit imposed by power structures that one must transcend to realize a wider range of possibilities. These varied definitions make the term difficult to apply as a theoretical lens. All definitions of identity could be critiqued and have theoretical limits. However, as difficult as it is to understand identity in a way that consistently explains our internal experience in relation to the external world, the concept is nonetheless important for crafting a lens to analyze the literate practices that emerge through Radical Truth's programming and many of the core questions at the heart of writing studies as a discipline. The purpose of this section is to craft a theory of identity suitable for the context of this project.

Sanchez: Identity as Event

One key text that I use to conceptualize identity in the context of this project is Raul Sanchez's book *Inside the Subject*, which theorizes identity though the lens of "the event*."* Sanchez begins by discussing the complexities and problems of conceptualizing identity. He claims that the field of composition and rhetoric is at an "impasse between the postmodern critique of identity and identity's continuing currency" (10). Here, Sanchez is critiquing the field because, on one hand, some scholars discuss identity in a way that's essentializing, while others split and dissect identity categories down to the point of meaninglessness, and as a result, identity as a theoretical concept leaves something to be desired and begets analysis that's never quite satisfying. Furthermore, because identity categories are the products of institutional processes, using them as lenses of analysis not only reifies the cultural value of those categories but strengthens the cultural legitimacy of the institutions by which those categories are constructed. On the other hand, identity categories relate to very real material conditions that affect people's lives and institutional power structures that oppress and hinder agency. What emerges is a sort of catch-22: it's problematic to not talk about identity because it allows oppressive practices to continue unchecked and it's problematic to talk about identity because it fortifies the hegemonic grasp of various beliefs, genres, and forms that can cause harm.

One affordance to conceptualizing identity as an event is that the framework enables us to analyze how the dynamics at play in a particular situation either support or limit agency. Because this theory, as Sanchez suggests, does not carry the same limitations as prior theories of identity, it could help us locate "where writing begins" (11). This is useful because it pertains to the relationship between the individual and

their surrounding environment and how individuals make choices and facilitate social action within those contexts. Sanchez responds to the limitations of both modern and postmodern concepts of identity by theorizing it as neither an essence nor a performance but as an event (22). The problem with conceptualizing identity as an essence is that it fails to account for the fact that identity is largely a result of institutionally inscribed beliefs. The problem with seeing identity as a performance is that that it overemphasizes the role and agency of the actor, thus giving little attention to the institutional and technological limits that hinder agency. Thinking of identity as an event positions the concept within specific contexts, which prevents us from thinking too abstractly, hence Porter's critique on institutional change. Furthermore, Sanchez's conceptualization of identity helps analyze and understand the extent to which humans have agency in a given context. By thinking of identity in terms of an event, we understand that there are specific power structures that limit agency. Yes, people are free to make choices based on how they're located in the context of an event, but that does not mean that we have unfettered freedom to embrace some existentialist ideal of total self-determination. In the context of any event, there are forces outside of anyone's control. While in most contexts, some people may have more agency than others, every context is mediated by institutional power structures that determine the range of possibilities for any given person. While identity categories have a limited capacity for analyzing the human experience in our post-modern world, particularly on smaller scales, Sanchez nonetheless argues that identity is still a concept that helps us understand what writers experience at the moment of inscription.

Conceptualizing identity as an event relates to institutional failure and institutional change. Just to recap what I've established in this chapter so far: one, institutions instill principles through processes that create our social imaginaries, and they make and enforce rules when they don't have guiding principles; two, communities emerge ad hoc in response to exigencies, and people use practices that develop from institutional processes to participate in communities. As such, community literacy relates to how people coordinate those literate practices in response to emerging exigencies (how they construct genres, teach new community members, engage with other communities, determine goals, use technologies, and so forth). As we've learned from our discussion on literacy, literacy skills shift because different communities have different goals and are situated differently *vis-à-vis* institutional power structures. If we're interested in institutional failures, community-based responses to those failures, or ways institutions might address those failures, Sanchez's conceptualization of identity is a useful tool for understanding how systems of power shape interpersonal relationships and allow for (or hinder) agency. Sanchez writes, **"**my interest in identity for the study of writing has less to do with who writers think they are at moments of inscription than with the various dynamics at play during those moments of inscription" (72). In other words, Sanchez calls us to question the forces determining what's possible for a given person, a community of people, or a coalition of communities at a given point in time. Taken one step further, I question how those dynamics and possibilities relate to the institutional processes that mediate communication at various points in the writing process. Such an understanding not only allows us to better understand how people write and how communities organize but also how abstract concepts such as racism, patriarchy,

capitalism, and the many other terms we use to denote oppression function differently from one context to another.

In sum, based on our discussion of Sanchez and what we've established in this chapter so far, identity is a concept signifying the relationship between our inner experience and the outside world, and as such, it involves the interplay between desire and the institutional power structures that shape or limit that desire. Because institutional power structures change over time and because every communicable action is situated under the control of various matrixes of institutional power, understanding the connection between identity and communication, and more specifically writing and literacy, requires that we identify as precisely as possible, what those limiting power structures are and how they relate to the agency of an individual, a community, or a coalition at any specific juncture in space and time.

Heidegger: Ready-at-Hand and Present-at-Hand

Martin Heidegger's theory of the present-at-hand and the ready-at-hand is useful for illustrating how identity functions within specific contexts as a hinge between desire and the institutional power structures that shape action. Heidegger uses the term present-at-hand to describe our inner experience with the external world in an indefinite sense (67). Consider the world around us: it's full of things, and most of those things have no meaning to us at any given moment. When teaching, I usually give my students the example of going to the hardware store. If one has little mechanical knowledge, they'll pass thousands of items without really noticing anything in particular. Everything blurs together. The items don't evoke an emotional response; they don't register in our short-term memory; and they certainly don't add to the structure of our long-term

memory. Those things are present-at-hand: they create the world around us, but there

is no connection between them and our internal desires. In contrast, ready-at-hand

objects present possibilities for action in the present (118). A common example is that of

a hammer. A hammer becomes ready-at-hand once it is identified as a hammer and not

an assemblage of wood and metal. The ready-at-hand represents the cultural hinge

between embodied knowledge and abstract knowledge, and it is in relation to the ready-

at-hand that the world becomes stable, if just for a moment, and individuals can identify

themselves in relation to that external world. When people can identify themselves in

relation to the ready-at-hand, they can use those objects to transform motive to action,

to respond to the exigencies affecting life, and to determine themselves in the world.

While the ready-at-hand describes how identity relates to action, for our

purposes, we must still go deeper to develop a more nuanced understanding about how

this theory relates to questions about agency and writing. To this end, it's important to

explore the process by which the ready-at-hand presents itself. In this regard,

Heidegger asserts that the process is one of affect. He claims that when one

encounters anxiety "the totality of involvement of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-

hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself"

(231). Bringing this idea back to questions of how the present-at-hand and ready-at-

hand pertain to notions of identity, institutions, agency, and writing, we can derive from

Heidegger that bewilderment emerges from anxiety, which destabilizes the structures of

meaning that we use to assess our surroundings and thus evokes the fight, flight, freeze

response. The root word of bewilderment, wild, indicates that this mindset momentarily

separates us from the structures of institutionalized society and the enculturation that

comes with that into a more primal state. This inability to assess the relationality between stimuli in a way that's consistent prevents people from being able to make choices in a given situation—it hinders agency.

As such, I define bewilderment as the absence of identity in a particular context. If we value literacy education for instilling the reading, writing, and rhetorical skills that could enable students to successfully respond to the exigencies impacting their communities and determine the course of their lives, then literacy therefore functions as a tool for crafting identity and locating oneself in relation to the world in contexts that might otherwise be bewildering. The key here for us as writing teachers is understanding how literacy relates to successful ways of responding to the emerging exigencies in society—particularly those affecting the most vulnerable communities— and how institutional power structures and technology both support and hinder action in particular community-based contexts.

Connecting this idea to our earlier discussion of Deleuze, the ready-at-hand represents the available means for positive action in a specific context. These objects become ready to serve as vessels for desire and paths forward for positive action. Because institutions, when they work as intended, instill principles that guide positive action, which enable us to exercise agency and make choices in the world, institutional processes thus shape desire in a way that's intelligible and socially acceptable to others. These processes enable us to see the world and identify our place in it in different ways. From processes of institutionalization, new objects will inevitably become ready-at-hand for us or we'll come to see the capacity to use previously known objects for different purposes. When institutional processes work well, mild levels of anxiety are

used in a controlled context to create stress. The person going through the process—whether that's a doctoral dissertation defense in an educational institution, an annual exam at a medical institution, or passing through customs at the airport—learns to use whatever principles are instilled by that process to make choices and alleviate the anxiety. By internalizing those principles in a controlled setting, an internal change occurs within a person. They see the world differently. They respond differently to their surroundings. Internalized principles thus become a guiding path forward. In short, we begin to identify new possibilities for ourselves and the people we care about.

Institutional processes direct most instances of learning even when their workings might seem obscured at first glance. For example, this past year, I've taken up foraging as hobby. I've bought books on how to identify various kinds of fungi and eatable plants. I've learned to read the topography of land and understand the nuances of what kinds of edible mushroom grown in various kinds of environments at various times of year. I learned to identify the poisonous varieties that should be avoided. I photographed my findings for my own records and shared what I made from what I found with my friends and coworkers. As a result of this learning experience, I now see mushrooms everywhere. Whereas they once blended into the background, they now catch my eye even when I'm not looking for them: they've become ready-at-hand. Also resulting from this, foraging has since become part of the identity I've created for myself living in rural Iowa. It signifies some of my core values; it connects to past hobbies and experiences from other eras of my life; and it provides a subject for small talk that could lead to deeper, more intimate levels of interpersonal connection and social bonding.

While it might appear that this learning was self-taught and developed from my own volition, there are still several institutional processes determining how I learned to forage and shaping the identity that emerged from that learning process. Namely, the books I read were themselves the results of principles instilled in the authors through their own families or by way of academic study in botany. Second, given the highly conservative, religious nature of the rural Midwest, I identified foraging as one of the few ways I could relate to my neighbors and colleagues, which is necessary to build trust and collaborate. And finally, my interest in foraging coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited other social and recreational activities due to government-issued lockdown mandates, which caused me to defer other less solitary projects. So even as I developed my knowledge about foraging alone and of my own choice, several layers of institutional power and influence shaped that decision and the changes in how I literally see the world that have resulted from it. It's also important to note, relating this discussion back to Heidegger, that there's an affective dynamic functioning in the process connecting institutional power, learning, and identity. Mushrooms can be fatally toxic. That fear alone influences the stylistic and rhetorical features of the books I studied and why I focused so keenly on them and the mushrooms themselves that I found on hikes. Social connection and belonging are essential human needs, and fear of isolation alone was a motivating factor in why I needed to develop an area of interest that could serve as an appropriate entry point into the narrative of my life given the sensibilities of the people I interact with daily. What I take from this is that the ready-at-hand—what we identify in the world, such as the morels I share with friends—becomes the foundation for more complex articulations of identity based on the social contexts we

inhabit. Second, the ready-at-hand is the product of emotional conditioning, smoothed out by processes of socialization. Therefore, institutional failures would influence what becomes ready-at-hand, which would thus relate to identity; however, more work needs to be done to understand how.

Lorde: Transforming Silence to Action

While Martin Heidegger and Audre Lorde are clearly very different figures in the history of philosophy, their ideas dovetail in interesting ways regarding affect and identity. Similar to Heidegger's idea that identities emerge from transcending the limits of anxiety and fear, Lorde claims that "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation" (42). According to Lorde, this process of self-determination "always seems fraught with danger" because it involves the possibility of social backlash and rejection (42). For Lorde, creating an identity requires overcoming social anxiety. Because we might be rejected or ridiculed by others when we assert our desires, it's often easier to remain silent and not move forward. As such, acts of agency and self-determination in the face of danger, risk, or rejection determines what becomes ready-at-hand as we move through the world and advance through the stages of life. This explains why there must be some level of fear or anxiety at the root of all institutional processes.

While Lorde focuses on *silence* and *language*, for our purposes, I prefer using the terms *desire* and *motive* because they're a little more precise for analyzing the rhetorical functions of identification. From this understanding, we could define identity as an alignment of desire, motive, and action in a particular context. Desire is within the province of the individual, relating to our base needs as well as our affective embodied

disposition to our surroundings, as informed by our past experiences. Motive, then, relates to how desire is articulated or assessed in relation to the outside world. Because our understanding of the world is the result of institutional processes of socialization, we can use cultural and rhetorical lenses to understand motive. And finally, action is how motive takes shape in the world. Because we use tools, processes, and techniques to engage in action, it is cultural, rhetorical, and technological. As such, activity theory is a useful lens for analyzing action in a given context. All aspects of this alignment: desire, motive, and action, are all mediated by various layers of institutional power, each evoking an emotional response that creates boundaries, limits, and paths forward. While these boundaries certainly can be traversed—but not without risk—they nonetheless create the cultures in which we create our lives and our conceptions of self and other.

By relating this understanding of identity as an alignment of desire, motive, and action to our discussion of institutions and communities, we could then understand how this connects to issues related to students of color and other vulnerable communities in the academy. When discussing the experiences of people from vulnerable communities, it is important to carefully qualify terms like *oppression* and *marginalization* as to not depict human experience too broadly. Even with the most flagrant examples of large-scale systematic oppression, such as chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, harmful values can be internalized differently from one person to the next, even if those people share the same identity categories. There is always going to be variance in terms of the institutional processes people have experienced from one person to another; there's variance between the institutions mediating action from one

point in space and time to another; and different communities are oriented toward different goals or in response to different sets of needs. This is why we need a conceptual frame to be able to point out oppression and marginalization with as much nuance and specificity as possible to find the most effective solutions.

If an institution is a social organization that instills principles that guide positive action and enacts rules to limit action when the institution is unwilling or unable to instill the principles needed to respond to the dynamics shaping communities and the exigencies affecting them, we could qualify an oppressed community as one being limited by institutional processes and rules in a way that prevents members of that community from being able to make choices for themselves and securing ways of meeting their needs. This results in a whole host of negative outcomes because the institutional power structures mediating the community context do not allow for a path forward; nothing in the world becomes ready-at-hand; there is no foreseeable way to align desire and motive into action, and thus, anxiety, depression, frustration, and desperation rise, often to dangerous intensities. Whereas a marginalized community, in contrast, is one that operates at the cusp of institutional influence. While oppression and marginalization certainly overlap, distinguishing between the two is important for two reasons. First, if we agree that agency exists at the root of meaningful human activity, which seems to be the consensus in writing studies (Sanchez 72), one of these concepts, oppression, is necessarily harmful in any context because it hinders that agency. Marginalization, however, is not necessarily a negative. Some communities do not want to live within the sphere of influence of some institutions, particularly if being pulled inward from the margins would lead to oppression or the appropriation or

degradation of culture. As some communities may reject institutionalization, others may have experienced marginalization due to institutional neglect or discrimination. In those situations, an institution may very well have the resources to support a community in responding to the exigencies impacting daily life but, for whatever reason (disorganization, politics, ignorance), is unable to do so.

In addition to qualifying oppression and marginalization, when discussing vulnerable communities, it's also important to understand stigmatization. Institutional power structures and the hard limits they impose—from prisons to social shaming—are one source of the fear that Lorde describes during those moments when we make choices to determine our personal becoming: the choices that transform desire to motive and action. Because institutional processes instill the beliefs that create the foundation of how we imagine reality, institutional processes stigmatize a person or a group of people when they instill beliefs that position a person or a group of people as wrong based on the practices they've developed for their own survival. As such, it would logically follow that a person or a group of people who embody a stigmatized identity would feel as if they *are* wrong when they are under that institution's sphere of influence. This would then perpetuate feelings of anxiety because the structure of the stigmatized person's world is organized as a threat to that person's autonomy and safety. Since institutionalized beliefs relate to what we're able to identify, hence the ready-at-hand, and anxiety prevents the ready-at-hand and present-at-hand from forming, people who embody stigmatized identities often struggle making choices: the world is too unstable; fragmented memories of the past and imaginations of the future swirl, shift, and break apart; and stimuli evoke conflicting visceral responses. Since

literacy is about making choices, it would follow that people who embody stigmatized identities would encounter special challenges as writers.

Implications for Writing Studies

Given my objective for this study is to learn how Radical Truth participants are writing in across and between institutions and communities, and how the literate skills that support that writing relate to the skills, principles, and beliefs instilled by the program, the study's findings relate to how we understand learning transfer and how we assess the efficacy of writing programs.

Transfer

To make learning more relevant and effective, scholars in Writing Studies have discussed questions relating to learning transfer over the past three decades. Such questions aimed to qualify the various kinds of transfer, understand that conditions upon which transfer happens, and how to adapt teaching practices to facilitate transfer. From the framework I've developed in earlier sections of this chapter, we can understand transfer as the application of the principles instilled in an institutional context to a secondary context, usually in a community-based setting. However, because communities are mediated by technology and institutional power structures, which affect what becomes ready- and present-at-hand, I argue that studying transfer should involve studying how such technological and institutional mediation shape identity both in the institutional contexts where learning happens and the community contexts where learning is applied. From this understanding of transfer and learning, I argue that quasi-institutional spaces like Radical Truth allow researchers to do both because they

provide the structure for students to synthesize their experience across many spaces of the institution and connect those experiences to their lives outside of school.

Regarding the forms that transfer might take, in the early 1990s, David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon coined the terms low-road and high-road transfer to differentiate the two ways people apply what they've learned between contexts. Low-road transfer refers to learning specific, tactile tasks that become second nature (7). Continuing with the transportation metaphor, an example of low-road transfer might be learning to operate a manual transmission. While there could be a slight learning curve resulting from variation in equipment, purchasing a new vehicle does not require one to re-learn how to drive. Furthermore, low-road transfer does not require reasoning. A person does not need to know how the principles of physics relate to transmission and engine design to drive stick; and as such, knowledge of how to operate a manual transmission probably would not inform decision making in other situations that governed by physical mechanics, such as repairing a broken appliance.

Perkins and Salomon argue that high-road transfer is different because it does relate to abstract reasoning skills and requires conscious thought and reflection (7). For instance, in my technical writing courses, students learn how to design and compose procedural documents. One principle related to instructional design that I emphasize in class is that detailed, specific instructions, such as a manual for installing a solar panel, lead people to more accurate outcomes, but more general instructions that require some degree of problem-solving, such as a common syllabus for new writing instructors, more effectively teach skills. Through the process of completing different sets of instructions and writing their own instructions for different purposes, students

learn how to apply this principle in a range of contexts, from writing stage directions for a play to writing an onboarding plan for new hires at a private firm. Because this principle could be applied in many ways in many contexts, doing so would constitute high-road transfer.

While the low- and high-road metaphors indicate that the term *transfer* can refer to different cognitive processes, research shows that marking a clear distinction between the two is not simple. For instance, Michael-John DePalma and Jeffery Ringer advance a more recursive, situationally mediated understanding of transfer, *adaptive transfer*, through expanding upon Etienne Wenger's concept of brokering. DePalma and Ringer define adaptive transfer as "the conscious or intuitive process of applying or reshaping learned writing knowledge in new and potentially unfamiliar contexts" (141). Using Wenger's terminology, as people enter new communities of practice, they bring with them their past knowledge and experiences. Some of this knowledge and experience is relevant but needs to be repurposed in some way while other knowledge is not relevant and won't be used at all, and novice participants will inevitably realize the need to learn new skills as well. When novice participants apply what they already know in situationally appropriate ways within a new community of practice, a dialectic process occurs through which novice participants undergo transformations of identity because they identify different ways of engaging with the world, and to a lesser extent, the community of practice is transformed too due to the unique perspectives that novice participants bring. This understanding of transfer both complicates and blurs the distinction between low- and high-road transfer because participating in new situations requires a combination of both skills in addition to new learning.

In the introduction to a special issue on transfer in *Composition Forum*, Elizabeth Wardle proposes a concept similar to adaptive transfer, which she calls *expansive learning*. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Wardle argues "for an understanding of repurposing as the result of particular dispositions that are embodied not only by individuals but also by what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'fields' and the intersections between the two" (Creative Repurposing). Much like adaptive transfer, expansive learning focuses on the dialectic between the individual and the community. Through this lens, as people engage in institutional processes of learning, they undergo a change in disposition as they internalize new principles through which they can read and respond to the world, and thereby identify new possibilities and perform new roles across varied contexts. Therefore, when using adaptive transfer or expansive learning as a lens of locating and analyzing learning, researchers could note changes in a person's character as a result of learning, even if the student can't articulate what they learned.

Doug Brent's article "Crossing Boundaries" is a good example of how learning can relate to changes in disposition and identity. Brent's study focuses on a group of professional writing students as they attempt to apply what they've learned in coursework to the demands of various off-campus apprenticeships. While Brent's data does indicate some evidence of low-road transfer through students' knowledge of citation conventions, he finds no direct evidence of high-road transfer. However, his analysis does point to a sort of general transformation, which implies a more sophisticated level of learning beyond sentence-level conventions. Brent refers to a participant named Amy who had difficulty articulating how she applied specific

knowledge from her writing classes as a business intern, yet as a result of her education, Amy nonetheless adopted a more rigorous approach to her responsibilities as a volunteer Sunday-school teacher at church (570-571). In this case, Brent's participant, while not directly applying what she learned at school to her role at church, is able to identify new possibilities for herself at church, and from that identification, she's able to respond to her surroundings and the needs her communities in ways that her teachers on campus couldn't have anticipated.

To connect these theories of transfer to the ideas discussed earlier about identity and institutions, no matter if we're using DePalma and Ringer's notion of adaptive transfer or Wardle's notion of expansive learning, both relate to how people apply the principles instilled in one institutional context to another context. As Jeff Ringer and Sean Morey argue in "Posthumanizing Writing Transfer," transfer occurs within a "material matrix" (299). In this regard, every social space is comprised of social being but a vast array of other material things and influence how engage with their surroundings: nonhuman plants and animals, machines, buildings, geological formations, climate patterns, and so forth in addition to immaterial forces such as institutional influence and technology. In this sense, understanding transfer means understanding what those material entities and immaterial forces mediate a person's experience in every given moment, affecting what becomes present- and ready-at-hand for an individual writer at a particular point in space and time. This process is recursive, with past experiences shading the present, present experiences reframing the past, and with the interplay between past and present affecting how people reshape the world to build a future. If a person has experienced oppression, marginalization, or stigmatization

in the past, it would surely affect how they would be able to locate information and repurpose it in future contexts. Surely oppression, marginalization, and stigmatization aren't the only dynamics that hinder knowledge transfer, but this study could provide insight into how those dynamics function and how quasi-institutional spaces like Radical Truth can help mitigate the damage of prior institutional failures.

Writing studies scholars have also theorized how teaching might better facilitate transfer. The consensus in the field is that, yes, students can directly learn to transfer knowledge, but teachers need to be pedagogically deliberate for transfer to occur. Kathleen Yancey and her colleagues claim that studying transfer provides teacher-scholars with a means of understanding "how we can help students develop writing knowledge and practices that they can draw upon, use, and purpose for new writing tasks in new settings" (2), and they argue that writing teachers should "teach for transfer" by assigning reflective assignments throughout their courses, culminating with an end-of-term portfolio, which would prompt students to directly think about how different strategies within the writing process could be applied in other situations (34-35). The logic supporting this understanding of transfer, grounded in a critique of process-centered pedagogies, attempts to propel students toward high-road transfer and metacognition through anticipation, a key concept of learning in a zone of proximal development. While students might not encounter the genres of college writing outside the college classroom, they might still apply the same principles in civic or professional genres outside the institution, which supports the idea that institutions exist to enable communities to function successfully; and the notion of teaching for transfer is to be explicit about that dynamic. Yancey and her colleagues identify three ways in which

students transfer learning: assemblage, defined as slowly adding one or two key concepts to an existing framework of knowledge; remixing, defined as splicing prior knowledge and practices with new experiences; and through critical incident, which is defined as learning from a past failure (104). All three of these moments of transfer could connect learning from one institution to another and from an institutional context to a community context, but they all assume a prior level of socialization stemming back to a primary institution.

Echoing Yancey et al., Dan Fraizer claims that writing teachers should coach for transfer. Fraizer's study, "First Steps Beyond First Year," builds upon interviews with college students as they transition out of first-year composition and instructors from various academic disciplines to understand which FYC learning outcomes most directly relate to teachers' expectations in other fields. Fraizer finds that the most relevant learning outcomes preparing students to write across the curriculum relate to an understanding of writing as situated practice, and thus—also echoing Yancey and her colleagues—advocate for metacognitive reflective (51). In other words, the beliefs that shape genres and principles guiding effective rhetorical choices are related to the dynamics that affect communities. Because these dynamics vary to such an extent, it's difficult to predict what dynamics students will encounter, and as such, rather than teaching students any one set of generic conventions, a better choice is to teach students how to identify how various social dynamics affect genre in general.

Rebecca Nowacek's book *Agents of Integration* theorizes how people transfer knowledge across communities and contexts. Nowacek draws from Lev Vygotsky's social development theory of learning and Etienne Wenger's theory of brokering to

argue that writing teachers can encourage students to recontextualize what they learn in class through teaching how genres function in activity systems (17). While the understanding of transfer in Yancey et al. may unintentionally lead to students engaging in low-road transfer in situationally inappropriate ways, Nowacek's understanding of transfer assumes that writing is a tool that people use within specific social contexts to achieve a specific purpose, and by teaching student writers how communities use tools to achieve specific outcomes, they'll be more likely to know how to effectively apply what they learn about writing in future, unfamiliar contexts. Nowacek ultimately envisions students as "agents of integration," and when done well, she argues, transfer theory should teach students how to integrate their unique skills and experiences into new communities of practice (68).

Examining similar questions related to metacognition and transfer of genre and knowledge, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi's study titled "Tracing Discursive Resources" seeks to "articulate what transfers into and from FYC and how [to] reimagine FYC in light of such research" (316). The authors find that students can generally recognize superficial differences between genres, but they struggle to employ their knowledge of familiar genres to make rhetorical choices when writing in a new genre or using a familiar genre in new situations. Further, Reiff and Bawarshi's study indicates that students are less likely to transfer genre knowledge when faced with "academic trigger words...such as essay, analyze, and research," which tend to push students toward relying on the practices that worked in high school (324). If institutional forms of socialization assume prior institutionalization, it makes sense that students would fall into old patterns when they encounter old terms. Reiff and Bawarshi also note

that when students do transfer generic knowledge, they tend to talk less about the genre itself and more about the specific strategies that worked in the specific context in which they were writing (229). Again, this makes sense because people are not thinking about abstract concepts when engaged concretely in a specific situation. In the end, Reiff and Bawarshi call teachers to encourage students "to embrace strategically and productively the role of novice...in order to draw on and adapt a wider range of prior genre knowledge and attendant resources" (330). The humility of taking such novice stance prevents students from assuming that concepts and the defined along the same terms between institutions.

Another study inquiring into transfer between institutions is "Here They Do This, There They Do That" by Todd Ruecker. In this study, Rucker analyzes how the institutional differences between a community college and a large, four-year state university affect how well students—specifically bilingual Mexican and Mexican-American students—transition from high school to college. Ruecker finds, unsurprisingly, that due to differences in resources and instructor professionalization, students were able to transition with greater success, measured in terms of retention and GPA, at the four-year school. To bridge this gap, Ruecker ultimately argues for more collaboration between institutions (114). Howard Tinberg raises similar concerns in his study ""Reconsidering Transfer Knowledge at the Community College," which locates lack of student confidence, scheduling conflicts that prevent students from taking courses in sequence, poorly trained instructors, and discrepancies regarding the purpose of college writing instruction as key dynamics that both prevent students from transferring knowledge between two-year institutions and their communities and also

prevents faculty from having meaningful conversations about transfer and better practices for writing instruction (29).

Again, no matter if we're teaching for transfer, coaching for transfer, or teaching recontextualization, based on the framework grounding this study, all such pedagogical activity requires an understanding how past institutionalization might relate to what becomes ready- or present-at-hand for students in the present and to anticipate the kinds of technological and institutional mediation students will likely encounter in future situations after graduation. Studies like Ruecker's and Tinberg's show just how much the beliefs reified and the limits placed by institutional spaces—including everything from architectural design to computer software to the faculty teaching load—can impact how students identify themselves within the institution, which in turn affects what students learn and how they recontextualize that knowledge.

While most work in writing studies on transfer has focused on concerns related to FYC or transfer between home and school, a couple address transfer in ways that relate more directly to the scope of this project by connecting writing to extracurricular spaces of learning. One of which, "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy" by Jenn Fishman et al. inquire into the pedagogical potential of using public performance in first-year writing. The data grounding the study is from the first two years of the Stanford Study of Writing, an extensive five-year longitudinal study that followed 189 first-year students from Stanford University's 2001 cohort, to better theorizes the connections between the many facets of college writing students encounter from the first day of orientation through graduation (225). Building on Shirley Brice Heath's work observing poetry readings and drama workshops at Boys and Girls Clubs, Fishman and her colleagues

argue that performance is a collaborative, multimodal form of communication that enables students to recognize knowledge they have gained in non-academic spaces and transfer that knowledge into their academic work (226-227). In brief, the article's two case studies show that performative acts, such as acting and spoken-word poetry, facilitate transfer because they encourage student writers to make deliberate choices based on different audiences and contexts. Specifically, they claim that performance is both "a tool for innovation" and "a potential vehicle for helping students to transfer literacy skills from situation to situation" (227).

Kevin Roozen's "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Literacy" also address transfer in extracurricular contexts, but he doesn't name the term directly. The study follows a student named Charles, Roozen's basic writing student, who happens to be failing an intro-level public speaking course. Midway through the term, Charles pulls from what he learned from performing spoken word poetry outside of class and writing his school's newspaper to improve his performance in the public speaking course, which Roozen credits as a "purposeful and systematic effort to assemble and coordinate a constellation of texts, practices, and activities" (25).

While I agree that such performances do provide students the opportunity to take a stance and make specific choices to present their knowledge to a specific audience and for a specific purpose, I'm interested in studying spaces like Radical Truth because such spaces show how institutions are not monolithic. The principles and limits placed around student learners vary significantly from one corner of the institution to another: from a science lab to a humanities seminar; from football practice to the financial aid office. Different technologies mediate social activities, and different values and politics

structure learning. If we're considering how to better support students from diverse backgrounds, it's important to be able to identify how the various spaces within an institution position people in different ways. Studying literacy and writing in quasi-institutional spaces like Radical Truth can help educators identify the practices that create perceptions of oppression, marginalization, and stigmatization in ways that parallel the world outside the gates of university. Such spaces are also valuable for studying the emerging exigencies impacting the communities that matter to students both on campus, back home, and elsewhere in between. Taking these two aspects of studying literacy in quasi-institutional spaces together, we could see how performing institutional ethnographies in such spaces could beget both a more nuanced approach to institutional change and more fine-grained strategies for teaching for transfer.

Assessment

As I was collecting data for this project, I was also working with a community theater to develop a drama program for formerly incarcerated teens. In the context of that secondary project, I was concerned about how the assessment and reporting practices requested by various grant foundations might invade participants' privacy, which could thus efface the therapeutic elements of the program. This concern led to me to think more about how assessment practices could serve as generative tools for learning about learning in the best cases but could also function as little more than bureaucratic hoops or, worse, a means of oppression and control. While I certainly don't think spaces like Radical Truth should be assessed like a college composition course or a grant-funded human services program, I do believe that ethnographic research in these quasi-institutional spaces where writing happens can beget a richer

understanding of the emerging exigencies impacting our students' communities and the institutional dynamics that could enable or hinder students as they piece together ways of reading, writing, and organizing themselves in response to those challenges and needs. While this kind of data isn't typically required for accreditation reviews, I suggest that research projects such as this are nonetheless useful for guiding curricular changes.

One key text that influenced my thinking about assessment is Elizabeth Wardle and Kevin Roozen's article "Addressing the Complexity of Writing Development." In that piece, Wardle and Roozen argue for an ecological model of writing assessment, which "[integrates] assessment, ethnographic, and longitudinal methodologies" (113). In doing so, Wardle and Roozen answer Kathleen Yancey's call to develop better assessment practices to understand how "the breadth of students' literacy experiences—in and out of school—impacts their ability to 'do' academic literacy tasks" (107). Wardle and Roozen value this approach because it emphasizes "the relationship between writing and identity" (113). Based on my discussion earlier in this chapter, if we understand identity to be an alignment of desire, motive, and action in a particular technologically and institutionally mediated context, an ecological model of assessment would call us to, on one level, understand students' desires and motives: Why are they in college? What emerging exigencies are impacting their communities? How are they reading, writing, and organizing themselves in response to these exigencies? And how are they struggling to respond to those exigencies? Such assessment practices could also call us to understand how students are (not) able to translate that motive into action: What technologies are students using? What values are reified by those technologies? And

how institutional genres, processes, and rules, both on campus and in society at-large

shape students' subjectivities? In doing so, we might be able to understand how to

adjust the learning outcomes in our courses to better respond to the emerging needs in

students' communities and develop a more nuanced understanding of the complex

dynamics affecting whether those learning outcomes are being met. This could inform

better teaching practices. As such, I'd like to offer this study as a springboard for

thinking about various ways of performing this kind of assessment and curricular

development work.

Further highlighting the importance of ecological assessment practices, Tony

Scott's article "Creating the Subject of Portfolios" depicts how assessment practices

shape identity in overly predetermined assessment contexts. In the article, Scott

analyzes students' comments regarding a reflective writing component of a state-

mandated standardized test for high-school students in Kentucky. The students'

reflections seemed to emphasize vapid learning narratives and platitudes over genuine,

sincere thought, which Scott deems to be a "[performance of] institutionalization" (7). In

this context, students are rewarded when they parrot back the learning outcomes and

principles instilled by the institution without having to demonstrate deep learning or high-

road transfer, which is of itself a form of institutional failure. Ultimately, Scott argues that

"texts structure activities that reinforce ideological and social conventions that define the

status quo within a particular milieu," which in turn "[shapes] subjectivities" (9). In other

words, genres of communication direct institutional power in a given context, which

positions different people in different ways in relation to that power structure; this affects

what becomes present- and ready-at-hand, which in turn, affects how people identify

possibilities for navigating institutional systems to meet their needs. As a result, in Scott's study, the student participants are not internalizing knowledge about reflective writing at all, but rather are merely learning how to submit to authority.

Other research in writing studies has also explored the link between assessment practices and identity construction. Asao Inoue's book *Antiracist Writing Ecologies* further develops Wardle and Roozen's ideas by arguing that we assess writing courses and programs within an ecology, which he defines as "a complex political system of people, environments, actions, and relations of power that produce consciously understand relationships between and among people and their environments" (82). This idea further exemplifies that while there is agency at root of any act of writing, it's still mediated by complex institutional systems. Therefore, performing a good, informative programmatic assessment requires understanding the ways those systems inform what a writer identifies at the moments of inscription as much as the student's writing itself. For this reason, Inoue argues that "writing assessment is more important than pedagogy because it always trumps what you say or what you attempt to do with your students" (9). Again, referring back to Scott, the key here is in understanding how systems locate and position various subjectivities in an institutional context at various moments of inscription. In doing so, Inoue's analysis indicates how unquestioned assessment practices that look only at student writing at not at larger systems can put students of color at a disadvantage, which could lead to marginalization and stigma.

Similarly, Siskanna Naynaha's article "Assessment, Social Justice, and Latinxs in the US Community College" also explores how assessment practices could work against students from vulnerable communities. In the article, Naynaha claims that

colorblind racism affects students of color when administrators use assessment measures "for all students 'equally' without regard for their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identifications" (199). Because Latinx students at community colleges have specific needs that aren't reflected in the assessment practices at the two-year colleges she studies, Naynaha claims that these practices function to do nothing more than gatekeep and are not designed to support students or their communities (199). Instead, Naynaha calls administrators to design "[assessment] practices that engage in the struggle for equality as a *process* that moves us collectively closer to social justice rather than conceiving of equality as a static state, which constructs assessment as a rigid mechanical procedure" (200). While Naynaha's assertion is certainly alluring, it leaves something to be desired in terms of pragmatics, especially since curricular assessment is mediated by higher-level institutional entities that often have more conservative ideologies and goals. What, exactly, would such an assessment process look like?

Jonathan Alexander's article "Queered Writing Assessment" could perhaps lead us closer to an answer. In the article, Alexander discusses ethical dilemmas he faces in his role at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) as he embodied the identities of queer theorist and writing program administrator, which are sometimes at odds. As an administrator, Alexander argues that assessment functions to normalize, which he defines as the "affectively and even materially powerful push to get everyone on the same page" (202), but as a queer theorist, he sees this as a problem those normalizing processes can cause administrators and teachers to "lose sight of those who are on alternative trajectories" (202). To exemplify this point, Alexander discusses a time when

a programmatic assessment indicated that UCI's FYC program was well preparing

students for success in upper-division WID courses but transfer students from a local

community college were not performing as successfully in those same courses. Many of

Alexander's colleagues suggested that UCI's FYC program should respond by creating

new placement tests and courses for transfer students, which Alexander opposed

because he didn't think it'd be right to have nontraditional students face even more

bureaucratic hurdles and he understood that nontraditional students at community

colleges often have different goals, needs, and abilities compared to their traditional

peers (204). Instead, Alexander "wanted to know what *story* this data was telling us

about these students," which led him to engage the community college "to have a broad

set of conversations about what writing is, what we wanted our students to understand

about writing, and…what our students could teach us about writing from their

perspectives" (204). From those conversations, the two institutions shared planning

notes, collaborated to host workshops for students and pedagogical institutes for

instructors, and developed strategies for preparing doctoral students for careers at two-

year colleges (204). Rather than reproducing a preconceived outcome, Alexander's

approach to assessment goes beyond mandated institutional processes to create a

living process that expands and takes shape in unpredictable ways as he engages the

data. This leads to a more nuanced understanding of the educational ecology at hand,

which can inform better choices regarding how a curricular writing program could better

support the needs of a diverse student body. From an antiracist standpoint, if we're

sincerely interested in what's affecting BIPOC students and other students from

traditionally underrepresented populations, administrators shouldn't only engage them

old in traditional academic spaces where, as we see with Scott, they tend to just

perpetuate performances of institutionalization. In this sense, co-curricular writing

spaces like Radical Truth, where students have more leeway in how they express

themselves and how they form relationships, could be important sites to have the kinds

of conversations that Alexander exemplifies and to build more complete narratives

about why writing matters to our students; what might be keeping them from thriving in

the classroom; and how we can better meet and support their needs.

2. Scaling as a Feminist Ethnographic Methodology

Introduction

While Michelle LaFrance's methodology in *Institutional Ethnography* illuminates how day-to-day institutional activities relates to larger institutional structures as evidenced by formal documents, polices, and procedures, the methods she employs become less pertinent when studying writing spaces at the margins of an institution or community writing spaces that aren't directly under institutional control. In formal institutional spaces, like the classroom or a committee meeting, identities and activities are determined by rigid structures and predetermined outcomes. Whereas in spaces like Radical Truth, relationships are established and maintained in other ways, like through reciprocity and emotional vulnerability. There aren't contracts, grades, and promotions determining how people orient themselves to the space and the activities that happen there. Still, like all human social spaces, the activities and identities that emerge within Radical Truth are still mediated by layers of institutional and technological influence, even when that influence might seem invisible. As someone who builds and facilitates community-based writing programs, I'm interested in identifying the indirect ways institutional influence affects how people engage those spaces and how that engagement supports or hinders a program's curricular potential, particularly regarding worldbuilding. Throughout the years I spent working on this project, my goal has been to develop a methodology to make institutional influence visible. In this chapter, I'll detail how I went about doing that methodological work, tracing my interest in feminist ethnography, institutional ethnography, and sociolinguistic

scaling to develop methods that researchers can replicate to analyze how best to develop community writing programs in relation to institutional mediation.

I started working with Radical Truth in February 2014, the first year of my doctoral studies. Daryll, wanting to document the program's successes, had reached out to my graduate program's director at the time, a nationally respected community literacy scholar, to connect him with a PhD student to write an article about the program. The graduate director recommended me due to my experience teaching poetry at a halfway house for formerly incarcerated men back in Chicago. Initially, the plan was for me to write the article collaboratively with the graduate director and Daryll. However, that collaboration never got off the ground due to the complexities of aligning our schedules. Furthermore, my past work in post-carceral spaces only shared superficial similarities with Radical Truth, and despite pressure from the graduate director to churn something out fast, I did not feel comfortable writing about a space that I initially understood so little about—particularly given my positionality as a white man in a Black space at a predominantly white university. It just didn't feel right. While I hadn't read anything about ethnographic or feminist ethics at the time, I know that I had to become a sincere part of Radical Truth's community to have something meaningful to say about the program. So for the first two years or so, I just engaged the program as a participant, showing up at workshops and open mics, writing poems, judging slams, and going on field trips with the other poets as I completed my coursework and adjusted to my new life in graduate school. There was no specific research question on my mind or goal I was working toward. I just wanted to learn about the space by becoming a part of the community.

Ethnography and the Body

When I was facilitating poetry workshops at the halfway house in Chicago, I was particularly interested in the act of performing writing for an audience as a means of identity reconstruction, particularly after the state-inflicted traumas of incarceration. Following that inquiry in my coursework, I came across the work of Dwight Conquergood, a performance studies scholar who wrote about Hmong refugees in Thailand and gang members living in Albany Park, the same Chicago neighborhood where I did my undergraduate work. While it was performance and his connections to Chicago that drew me to Conquergood, his methodological work on ethnography resonated with me because it described what I was already unknowingly doing with Radical Truth. Conquergood claims that "ethnography is an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing. The embodied researcher is the instrument" (83). I recall my experience sitting in those first workshops, meeting the poets, and trying to remember their names, considering what about myself and my life to reveal and what to conceal, a process heavy with apprehension, doubt, and anxiety. Occasionally, topics would surface in passing that would serve as touchpoints of commonality, which would later become the foundation for future conversations. Each micro-happening from one moment to the next would stir a different combination of emotions and memories, indicative of the cultural contours of the space; the values, norms, and expectations of the community; and how my body and the life I've lived were positioned in relation to the social structures mediating my existence in that space.

Conquergood invites ethnographers to understand performance as both "cultural process" and "ethnographic praxis" (96). Performance is a cultural process in so much as that every human interaction is, in one sense, a fiction—a framing of one's life through disclosures and omissions carefully constructed to align with—or deliberately reject—the social and cultural dynamics at play in a given point in space and time. Sitting quietly in those workshops, when people were first getting to know me, I was deciding (consciously or otherwise) how to piece together my life in that moment. And the other poets and Daryll himself were doing the same. The choices we were all making in those moments reflect the beliefs and values of the community, influenced by layers of institutional power, past histories, and multiple centers of authority. What we share in that space, we share for reasons that reflect the culture and the rhetorical commonplaces that guide human interaction at that moment in SpaceTime. What we conceal in that space, we conceal for cultural and rhetorical reasons too. Identifying those reasons begets not only a better understanding of the culture the ethnographer is engaged in but also the cultures, communities, and institutions that have shaped the ethnographer in the past, opening endless paths for research.

As I studied ethnographic methodologies, I was drawn to qualitative work of feminist scholars. Most of the gay activist movements I've been involved in were intellectually grounded in second wave, intersectional, and Black feminist thought. Feminists have traditionally been our closest allies since our respective work is often mutually rooted in the principle of bodily autonomy and a critique of patriarchy and rigid, traditional gender roles. Feminist intellectual traditions have shaped how I see and engage with the world around me, and for that reason, I've been able to easily move in,

out, and between gay, queer, and feminist spaces. As a result, this methodology has been shaped by the work of Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway. Tsing suggested that ethnographers develop analysis by focusing on the local, which she defined not by geography but by "acts of positioning within particular contexts" (31). Whereas Haraway argued that ethnography is a "view from the body" rather than the "view from above" (196). From Haraway's perspective, the researcher's body is the nexus point where meaning is made, as the sensations and knowledge that the researcher embodies develop new meaning in relation to the contexts and people the researcher engages with in an act of reciprocity. However, as people become enmeshed in a community, in a social space, that performance becomes less deliberate, less anxious, and more habitual. As we tell the same set of stories over and over, our lives become framed in particular ways that tend to calcify as relationships grow stronger. Fictions become dispositions, and dispositions become identities. At which point, the cultural dynamics that have shaped a given self begin to fade away and become invisible. This is why it's important to be aware of the tensions we feel when we're new to space. Those frictions are the gateways to analysis and learning.

This notion that the positionality of the self is a nexus point for knowledge making can be traced back to the work of another qualitative researcher from the feminist tradition, Dorothy Smith, who developed standpoint theory, which Patricia Collins later advanced. Smith claims that "all knowledge is knowledge from a particular standpoint and what which has been claimed as objective knowledge of society conceals a male bias (371). Based on Smith's theory, ways of knowing hold credence (or not) in relation to existing social structures and institutions. Because oppressive regimes rest on an

illusion of objectivity to assert a legitimacy of power, objectivity—per Smith's feminist critique—becomes a guise for maintaining the misogynist status quo. Collins expands to include white supremacy, opening standpoint theory as means of analyzing epistemic happenings beyond matters of gender (747). From the lens of standpoint theory, ethnography is rooted in understanding how knowledge is constructed, verified, and valued in relation to how the people involved in a given context are situated in relation to one another and the social structures and institutions mediating their lives, again echoing Tsing. In the context of Radical Truth, my age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, status within the institution, past places of residence, educational history, and work and activist experience all factored in to how I identified myself to the program's participants and framed my motives for being involved in the space. How I identified and situated myself in relation to the participants also influenced how they identified themselves to me. Together, this process of mutual identification creates boundaries and limits around the knowledge that the participants and I were able to create together in relation to the preexisting culture of the program.

Exploring My Own Standpoint

When initially meeting new participants, I'd share that I was a graduate student studying rhetoric and writing whom Daryll invited into the space to write about the program. As I did earlier in this chapter, I explained my past work teaching poetry in post-carceral spaces. To explain my motives for doing that work, I told them I was a prison abolitionist who believes that the state uses the prison industrial complex as a means of instilling fear to keep people from rising up against all the other economic,

environmental, and social injustices that inflict so much harm on so many lives while making the earth unlivable. Because of that, I see prison abolition as a first step necessary for deep structural change that prioritizes people and the environment over an ever-expanding market and the exploitation of labor and resources. I'd also disclose that I came to prison abolition as a result of having been brutalized by police myself, an experience that led me to want to learn how to build community spaces, located away from traditional institutions, where people could heal from state-sanctioned violence.

Apart from those initial motives, the participants would often talk about New York City. I'd share how my family's been rooted in the New York City area (Brooklyn, Hoboken, Jersey City, and Yonkers) for five generations, which would usually lead to a discussion about my Slavic and Latin European ancestry. I shared how I was gay, but only in the context of my work as an activist. In response, the poets talked about their own activist projects, the cities where they grew up, their academic majors, and their own family traditions. But while these disclosures helped form these new relationships and fold me into the community, for every story I told, there were dozens of others I omitted. For example, while speaking about my connections to New York City, I'd rarely share that I spent most of my childhood in Tucson, Arizona. When talking about my work as a grad student, I'd wait to disclose that I also taught technical communication at the same institution. While talking about police brutality, I'd never talk about the events that led to those violent altercations. While talking about gay and queer activism, I'd never detail what it was we were exactly fighting for or the tactics we'd use.

How these life narratives emerge in a given space illuminates how institutional mediation and the social and rhetorical norms that develop from that mediation affect

what's possible with regard to the both the interpersonal relationships that can develop in that space; the kinds of knowledge and analysis that's possible in the context of any qualitative research project; and what's possible pedagogically in any literacy program. For instance, the emphasis on New York City in nearly everything Radial Truth does creates a culture where urban literacies and the forms of knowledge associated with them—whether that knowledge relates to using public transportation, navigating government services, resisting the pressures of gentrification, bystander intervention, street fashion, or breakdancing—are particularly respected, valued, and shared. Conversely, the same emphasis on New York City and urban literacies creates a barrier for writers who are not from New York City or any other large coastal metropolis in being able to access the group and from sharing what they've learned from their own lived experiences. This dynamic could be seen in a positive or negative light, depending on how one is positioned in relation to the program, but either way, the emphasis on New York City, the culture it begets, and the limits it creates speaks to how Radical Truth is positioned within the larger institution of Seneca University, a relatively diverse but still predominantly white research university in a mid-sized rustbelt city where most students are from the I-95 Bos-Wash corridor. It makes sense that a lot of Seneca's urban BIPOC students would feel some degree of culture shock attending college in a place that's so extremely different and unfamiliar, and why such a poetry program would take shape in response to that need. Still, like all social spaces, Radical Truth privileges and validates some literacies and ways of knowing over others. Understanding how that privileging happens—in relation to the researcher's own positionality—becomes a

means of understanding how institutions and communities working in the context of

literacy education function regarding larger socio-cultural dynamics.

By positioned myself in the space as an advocate for gay men's issues and

prison abolition, I framed my work as existing outside of some imagined mainstream.

While the extent to which my community projects are actually counter-cultural,

particularly given my professional identity, is undoubtedly messy and complicated, such

positioning nonetheless opened the possibility for trust and knowledge-making with

Radical Truth poets with respect to matters of social and institutional critique, which was

fitting given Radical Truth's positionality as a quasi-institutional space, explicitly within in

but feeling vaguely independent from the larger institution of Seneca University. While

there were likely many topics that the writers didn't feel comfortable talking about with

me, they knew they could trust me on matters related to gender, sexuality, and the

aspects of society that upset them. In fact, reading over my interview transcripts, Black

poets only brought up issues of race in relation to some larger institutional critique, such

as Seneca University's decision to sunset a popular BIPOC scholarship program[2]. While

I framed my commitment to my work in relation to gay men's issues and prison

abolition, I'd only disclosed vague details about what activism really means to me, what

issues I was addressing, or the specific events that led me to prison abolition. I omitted

those details because those stories fall outside the cultural norms of the space, relating

to topics that might still be stigmatizing—particularly given my role as an instructor at

Seneca University who could potentially have the poets as students in class any given

semester. This is important to note because unspoken stories reveal the specific limits

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[2] One participant spoke extensively about race in the interviews but later asked to retract those comments.

of social spaces that are difficult to transcend without violating the status quo. Even in

spaces that value expressionism to such an enthusiastic degree as Radical Truth, some

topics are nonetheless off limits. Even if I don't know what stories the writers held back,

I know what stories I held back. From a researcher's standpoint, this matters because

there were personal questions and experiences affecting what I noticed and

remembered from my time observing the program, and they shape how I'm analyzing it,

yet it would be ethically questionable to write about those motives and insights given

that they did not factor into the relationships I fostered with the writers and

administrators who were involved in that space. Still, being aware of that boundary can

nonetheless beget a more critical understanding of the institutional context shaping

Radical Truth and how that institutional dynamics could shift to support a wider range of

people.

Institutional Ethnography

To be able to analyze the institutional dynamics that shape social spaces,

Michelle LaFrance developed her institutional ethnographic method by expanding

Smith's standpoint theory to connect micro-level practices within institutional contexts to

macro-level institutional structures (5). Again, if knowledge is aways situated in relation

to systems of power, how one is situated within an institution can beget analysis on how

that institution constructs and values knowledge; who benefits from how given forms of

knowledge are either embraced, marginalized, or stigmatized; how those dynamics

affect what's pedagogically possible as teachers of writing and literacy; and what those

dynamics mean in relation to society as a whole. For LaFrance, the idea of "work,"

rather than the researcher's body, is the nexus point in which ethnographers can create knowledge by bridging the micro to the macro, connecting practices to discourses, ideologies, and the systems that produce them (5). Since work is a repeated social action that occurs in institutional spaces, researchers could use activity theory to connect everyday work practices to divisions of labor, tools and technologies, institutional goals and objectives, and the overarching values and principles that attempt to connect them (Russell and Yañez). From there, researchers could point to misalignments between those various moving parts, identify problematics within institutional systems, and make grounded recommendations for institutional change.

Per LaFrance's institutional ethnography, I started the data collection stage of this project by seeking to understand how Radical Truth's programmatic structure influences how participants use literacy in response to the exigencies impacting their communities. In doing so, I was hoping to gain an understanding of how quasi-institutional spaces like Radical Truth could best respond to emerging community needs, something I thought was necessary given how quickly our world is changing, which could also connect to my primary interest in building community-based spaces for healing from state-sanctioned violence. At the time, I was also teaching service-learning sections of a technical communications course where we were working with community theater to develop a drama program for formerly incarcerated teens. In that context of my professional life, I was particularly interested in learning how qualitative research methods could guide the community theater in identifying what their intended participants need in a way that would allow the participants to determine the program's continued evolution. Similarly, I thought that by understanding Radical Truth's

programmatic structure in relation to the challenges facing the writer's communities, I'd be able to make recommendations about how the program might change to better support the writers, a model that could transfer to other writing spaces.

Data Collection

I received IRB approval to study Radical Truth when I first met Daryll and started attending workshops. Once I decided that I'd continue working with Radical Truth for my dissertation, I had that approval renewed. Between both protocols, I received approval to study the program and engage participants for a period spanning eight years, though I only conducted fieldwork for five. Over that time, I compiled field notes in marble composition notebooks as I wrote poems with the writers in workshops, attended open mics, judged slams, and attended field trips (to New York City, of course) with the group. I filled 10 80-page notebooks in all, field notes and poetry combined. At the end of that two-year period, four years into my involvement with the program, I conducted interviews with participants. I wrote an email inviting participants to participate in semi-structured interviews to understand the value of the program regarding literacy and the needs impacting their communities, which I had Daryll send out over Radical Truth's listserv. Six poets responded with interest, but in the end, I only interviewed four: Carla, Rose, Amos, and Jeremy. I told the participants that I'd share the written interviews transcripts with them, with the option of redacting any information after the fact. I also told them they were free to identify themselves however they'd like, and I'd only identify them with the terms they use to describe themselves. When I say the interviews were semi-structured, I started with five basic questions, but through the follow-up questions I

asked, each interview veered in a different direction from the other three. This approach, as argued by Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, was to establish a basis degree of consistency between the interviews, while still giving participants some control over how their interviews would take shape while avoiding confirmation bias (39-40). I emailed the interview questions to the participants 48 hours in advance. The questions I asked were:

1) How long have you been attending Seneca University, and how long have you been a part of Radical Truth?

2) What communities were you involved with before coming to college?

3) Besides Radical Truth, what other communities are you involved with on campus?

4) How has Radical Truth helped you grow as a writer?

5) What new academic or professional interests have you developed since you started attending Radical Truth workshops and events?

To share more about the participants, Carla identifies as Afro-Latinx and queer. They were born and raised in Queens but spent their summers growing up in the Dominican Republic with their grandparents. Carla is also heavily involved with Seneca University's LGBT Pride Center and organizes events on campus to raise awareness of sexual assault. They're majoring in sociology. Rose, the daughter of immigrants from Guyana, grew in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. She was very involved in her church, and being a Black woman and a Christian are two very important parts of her identity. She was attending Seneca University on a prestigious slam poetry scholarship sponsored by one of New York City's professional sports teams. Rose is perpetually

overcommitted and is always involved in several community projects, most of which

relating to writing, publishing, and mentoring her younger Black peers. She studies

public relations and digital journalism. Amos grew up in The Bronx to a Puerto Rican

family, though his parents separated when he was a toddler, and he was raised in two

homes. He's transgender, gay, and an English major. He's open about his struggles

with bipolar disorder, and he got his start writing and performing poetry at open mic

events hosted by Housing Works, an AIDS organization that supports itself by operating

a popular bookstore and cannabis dispensary. Amos hopes to earn an MFA in poetry

after college. Jeremy identifies as an "obscenely liberal" straight white man. He grew up

in a progressive college town in a conservative southern state to transplanted parents

from New England. He lives with schizophrenia and participates in Radical Truth

because it's the only space on campus where he feels safe enough to open up about

his mental health and share coping strategies with the other poets. He's a close friend

of Amos. Jeremy studies biology and wants to someday work for a pharmaceutical

company to develop psychotropic medications with fewer side effects.

After the interviews were transcribed, I developed my initial coding scheme.

Through the process of working with the data, based on my knowledge of coding at the

time, I honed in on the codes *community*, *authenticity, evaluation*, and *impact* to

understand how Radical Truth's programmatic structure was influencing how the writers

were responding to the exigencies affecting their lives, which I planned to situate in

relation how Radical Truth is positioned as a part of Seneca University at large.

However, my process changed as I started working with my field notes and

experimenting with Johnny Saldaña's in vivo coding method. For Saldaña, in vivo

coding is a process that uses participants' exact words to develop the codes that will become the categories by which analysis is organized (116). In vivo coding is important from an ethical standpoint because it helps prevent the researcher for substituting their own ideas in place of those of the participants; it also gives participants a greater degree of influence in how qualitative research takes shape and helps to better ensure that the research conclusions reflect participants' culture and lived experiences. And, for this project, using in vivo coding guided me to far more nuanced, original analysis, helping me arrive at arguments I wouldn't have been able to come to if I had organized my analysis around my first-round codes. In this sense, in vivo coding allows for knowledge co-creation between researchers and participants.

Through the in vivo coding process, three codes emerged from the data: "*radical truth*," "*the process becomes part of you*," and "*living poetry*." "*Radical truth*" is the practice of sharing an idea, derived from a lived experience, that's powerful enough to challenge the rhetorical commonplace in a given space. An example of the radical truth that I'll explain in the following chapter was when Daryll performed a poem called "Camden" about the institutional failures that have eroded community in the places where he grow up. In performing that poem, he changed people's expectations and ways of engaging with the event where the poem was read. Another example, which I'll explain in Chapter 4, was when a poet named Shania won a poetry slam with a piece about sexual liberation called "A is for Amen," which redefined her sexual and religious identities while creating a point of commonality that connected nearly all the women who heard it. "*The process becomes part of you*" refers to how identities are created through repeated social actions. As an example of that code, there was a poetry

workshop in which Daryll instructed a writer named Stanley to practice performing a poem in the middle of a circle, while being provoked by other participants, until his disposition shifted. Another example is a poet named Carla, who as a result of sharing their poems, transitioned from being a shy wallflower to a prominent campus activist. And "*living poetry*" refers to the practice of using artmaking as a means of responding to the highs and lows of life to build empathy and elicit social action. One example of this was when Daryll spoke about how writing poetry helped him get through chemotherapy. Another example was an open mic event called Hiya China, which I'll discuss in detail in Chapter 4, where poets continuously adapted their poetry based on the changing people and technology influencing the event. Taken together, the three codes relate to how both people and communities evolve and change based on the material conditions mediating them, which includes institutional influence and technology, and the choices people make regarding literacy and language within those material contexts.

Scaling as a Feminist Methodology

While those three concepts offer inroads into understanding how Radical Truth's programmatic structure relates to how the poets use literacy in their communities, LaFrance's institutional ethnography, using work as a lens to connect the micro-level practices to macro-level structures while highlighting systematic problematics along the way, was not sufficient enough to make the connections I needed. Furthermore, speaking to my own standpoint within the institutions I was working in, by the time I reached the analysis phase of this project, I had left Seneca University to begin a new role as an assistant professor at a small liberal arts college in Iowa, where the context of

my professional life, the daily concerns and issues that I was responding to and the ways my labor was both valued and exploited, changed how I engaged with this project. In Iowa, I worked to develop a summer bridge program to support underprepared incoming first-year students, but due to institutional limitations beyond my control, it was difficult for the program to support the learning outcomes that I believed would be most effective. In preparation for the advent of generative AI technology, I built a technical communications minor while studying how that technology would likely reshape our culture and present limits for our current English majors. Working on *The Community Literacy Journal*'s creative writing section and coordinating a graduate fellowship with the Coalition for Community Writing and the Herstory Writers' Network, I learned about the limits affecting community literacy and writing sites across the country. I also developed art and educational programming for a syringe service program and an HIV clinic in Des Moines; in both contexts, the nonprofits I partnered with offered important protections giving my projects a greater sense of legitimacy and cultural capital, but they also censored my work so heavily that it was difficult to developing messaging that was culturally relevant to the communities they were consulting my help to reach. The common thread across all these contexts was institutional limitations. And while I was working on those projects while looking at my data, my motives shifted from wanting to study the literacy practices of the Radical Truth poets to develop methods for identifying community needs to developing a theoretical frame that would enable community literacy and writing researchers and practitioners to assess the pedagogical affordances and limitations of various sites based on how those sites are mediated by layers of institutional power.

Scalar theory from sociolinguistics enabled me to do just that. Jan Blommaert argues that scalar theory provides sociolinguists with a framework for studying language to understand how society is structured (3). In contrast to the prior paradigm that based in theories of discourse, which Blommaert critiques for incorrectly yielding a flattened, horizontal understanding society, scalar theory assumes society to be "layered and polycentric" (3). That layering refers to how society is hierarchal, and in every social context, some people have more power and influence than others. The polycentric aspect of scalar theory relates to horizontal structuring of society; some communities may have relatively equal power but operate under different cultural norms, and both communities could exert influence on a given social happening at an intersection of space and time, which I'll refer to as SpaceTime. For instance, suppose I'm developing a community event with the HIV clinic. That context is stratified vertically by many layers of institutional power: compliance officers, county- and state-level health departments, and grants from the federal government; and horizontally, influenced by LGBTQ nonprofits and community institutions, harm reduction nonprofits, homeless shelters, migrant community advocates, carceral justice advocates, and other social service organizations. Each of those entities, whether oriented vertically or horizontally in relation to a moment of SpaceTime affects what's socially possible, but not all affect what's possible to the same extent and in the same ways. Scalar theory presents a method for analyzing how and why some social forces have more power and influence than others; what those forces mean in relation to society at-large; and how those forces affect our work in writing and literacy education on the site-specific level. Scalar theory relates to Heidegger's concept of the ready- and present-at-hand because

scales, and the emotions they evoke, affect how people focus their energy based on how they're positioned in SpaceTime. It also relates to Smith's standpoint theory because any given constellation of scales in SpaceTime determine the standpoint of the people involved and how knowledge is constructed and valued.

For Blommaert, each scale represents what he calls an "order of indexicality," the social norms, beliefs, and values that affect social interactions within that scale's scope of influence (2). Per scalar theory, people move in, out, and between scales or emphasize certain orders of indexicality when they communicate. Analyzing those shifts in language makes salient what scales are influencing social action in what ways, which serves as a starting point for a range of research inquiries. Amy Stornaiuolo and Robert Jean LeBlanc expanded on Blommaert's theory by identifying categories of scalar shifts: upscaling, in which a person establishes authority by connecting to a higher scale, usually through abstraction; downscaling, when a person connects to a lower scale, usually through referencing concrete micro-level happenings; anchoring, when one calls attention to or reestablishes the social norms in a specific context; aligning, when one moves between two or more scales to privilege one over the others; contesting, when one moves between two or more scales to establish authenticity; and embedding, when one positions one SpaceTime moment within another (273).

In the context of this project, when analyzing my data, I used Stornaiuolo and LeBlanc's scalar moves to connect the three core concepts that emerged through my coding (radical truth, the process becomes part of you, and living poetry) to connect the concrete moments when those concepts surfaced to specific social structures shaping interpersonal communication in those moments. *Radical truth*, for instance, shows how

sharing lived experiences and the powerful truths learned from those experiences can challenge and shift orders of indexicality in moments of SpaceTime. *The process becomes part of you* emphasizes how people learn how to navigate between certain scales through social processes and that by aligning our lives with orders of indexicality, we create identities. And *living poetry* exemplifies how artmaking, slam poetry in particular, can allow people to move fluidly between scales to navigate life. This process guided my analysis in some unexpected directions. For example, in Chapter 4, I explore how global neoliberal economic policies shape how Radical Truth poets navigate the challenges of diversity at an open mic event, leading to a recommendation of best practices of building more inclusive spaces.

However, as I developed this project and analyzed the data, I also used scalar theory as a form of praxis regarding my other projects as well: facilitating art groups and education workshops; mentoring grad students; and developing curricula at a Christian college in rural Iowa. These diverse scaling experiences bring me back to Haraway's argument that the researcher's body is the nexus point for meaning making in feminist ethnographic research. While I don't know if the sociolinguistic theorists who have influenced this methodology identify as feminists or not, the use of scaling can nonetheless advance feminist ethnographic practices to understand how people are positioned by systems of power and to respond through an ethic of care. Scaling, as part of a feminist ethnographic method, is rooted in a felt sense, connecting the visceral to the intellectual. As our bodies exist in spaces, we feel emotions and embodied sensations that connect the past, present, and future together in a single moment. This positioning of temporal layers shifts along with the power mediating our bodies.

Throughout my life, I've always been acutely aware of shifts in institutional power. Being able to articulate that felt sense in relation to sociolinguistic scales and the histories, narratives, and norms that construct the spaces that I inhabit have allowed me to make better choices and set more realistic goals and expectations with regard to the various projects that give meaning to my professional and personal lives. It also provides a means, in tandem with activity theory and LaFrance's articulation of institutional ethnography, to trace the root problems that have emerged in the contexts framing my work, whether that be in a university, a nonprofit, or a community institution. From that, I present this methodology not only as means of transparency with regard to how this project took shape but also as blueprint that could be replicated by others doing complex community engaged work to identify the affordances and limitations or specific literacy sites and to make realistic, grounded choices with regard to pedagogical possibilities.

3. Living Poetry: Meaning-Making in a Fragmented World

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how Radical Truth supports writers'

literacy practices. Since literacy practices are so intertwined with the social contexts in

which they take shape, this chapter opens with a summary and analysis of Radical

Truth's Opening Night Reception, the first event of the academic year where veteran

poets return and reconnect with friends and where new poets are welcomed into the

community, to understand the beliefs, values, assumptions, and boundaries influencing

the culture within the program and how the program is situation in relation to the larger

institutional context and society at-large. With that foundation, the chapter will proceed

to explain Radical Truth's pedagogical practices and how they relate to the kind of

literacy education that occurs in this space, allowing poets to blend the wisdom and

knowledge they carry from their pasts in relation to the complex social histories and

institutional influences shaping their lives in the present. The chapter will also explain

how Radical Truth supports poets in developing new identities through somatic

practices of realigning the narratives they tell with the dispositions they embody, which

could help community literacy practitioners better understand the healing potentials and

limitations of writing spaces like these.

The Opening Night Reception

Radical Truth kicks off each academic year with a reception to welcome back

returning poets and hype the program for new first-years students. The reception is

always scheduled later in September to just give people enough time to acclimate to the

rhythm of the new academic year. The event is hosted in the Bebop Café, a

multipurpose room on the first floor of the Raymond Student Union on campus.

Raymond has four floors. There's banquet space used for lectures and formal events on

the fourth floor and a food court on the third. The second floor houses the campus

bookstore and some administrative offices, and on the first floor, in addition to the

Bebop Café, is The Down Low, a concert space that Radical Truth uses for poetry

slams and other events. The Office of Multicultural Matters (OMM), the administrative

office that houses Radical Truth, is located among the second-floor offices.

Due to Raymond's modernist post-war design, the building is notoriously difficult

to navigate. Because it's built into a hill, both the second and third floors are accessible

from the street, albeit from different directions. The easiest way to get to the Bebop

Café is to use the second-floor entrance, on the west side of the building, and then take

the west stairwell to the first floor. The other option is to use the third-floor entrance on

the south side of the building, take the east stairwell to the second floor, walk across the

building, and take the west stairwell to the first floor. Either way, it's confusing and few

who are new can find the first-floor performance spaces without asking for help. The

difficulty in navigating Raymond to find the first-floor performance spaces is part of what

makes the journey below so transformative. By the time you reach the first floor, you're

in a different mindset than you were when you entered Raymond only moments before.

There are few windows in Raymond, and the building's unorthodox design and layout

make it easy to feel disoriented. You can easily forget what floor you're on or what

direction you're facing. But the disorientation that occurs from the physical space of the

building also coincides with a shift in mindset too as one descends the west stairwell,

serving as a liminal zone between the first-floor performances spaces and the larger institution outside.

The west stairwell, which only connects the first and second floors, feels like a shrine to the early days of hip-hop culture. The space is completely covered in murals from floor to ceiling, spray-painted in vibrant colors: purple, gold, blue, peach, yellow, orange, and neon green. Immediately upon entering, the focal point is a mural depicting a group of seven young people, dressed in fashion typical of 1980s Black youth culture, dancing, losing control, and getting lost in the moment. The mural's caption reads, "1981-1991: The Golden Age." Next to it, off to the side, there are portraits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The other murals add to the urban vibe: subway cars, smokestacks, industrial piping, high-rise apartment buildings, a DJ at a turntable. The stairwell's long rectangular inner column, which the stairs themselves wrap around, is painted to look like an ancient stone wall, and inscribed on each stone is a name of a prominent early east-coast rapper, producer, or hip-hop group: The Soul Sonic Force, MC Lyte, Public Enemy, Leaders of the New School, DJ Pete Rock, Kool DJ Dee, and 45 King. Poems and rap lyrics, most of which are unattributed to anyone, line the walls as you descend the stairs:

> THE AGE OF THE B-BOY. SON OF P-FUNK, COUSIN TO STAR CHILD & IT'S WILD HOW WE'RE STILL NUMBER ONE—ONE—ONE CHIEF ROCKA. MELLE MEL & THE MESSAGE TO THE WORLDWIDE MASSES. BILLION $ SALES & BACKSTAGE PASSES TO THE REVOLUTION, BUT WE GOTTA KEEP OUR CONTRIBUTION REAL, LIKE BLACK STEEL IN THE HOUR OF CHAOS. MERGING TOGETHER INTO AN AUTONOMOUS CONGLOMERATION, WITH OUR OWN STUDIOS. PRESSING FACILITIES AND RADIO STATIONS. WHERE THE ONLY PEOPLE GETTING PAID ARE THE ONES DOING THE HITMAKIN'. NO MORE FAKIN' THE FUNK AS THE SUBSITY OF A CORPORATE PIMP…

BACKBEATS BUILT IN BACKSTREETS BECAUSE FREEDOM OF SPEECH DIDN'T REACH THE GHETTO, SO WE WENT ON THE DL TO TELL OUR EIGHT MILLION STORIES AT HOUSE PARTIES, STREET CORNERS IN THE DARK PROVING FREESTYLE IS AN ART. CRITICS STARTED JOCKIN'. RECORD EXECS THOUGHT OF THE CREAM THEY COULD BE CLOCKIN', AND BROTHERS WENT FROM UNDERGROUND HIPHOPPIN TO ROCKIN LIMOUSINES, GOLD RINGS AND THINGS.

BRING IT BACK, THAT OLD NEW YORK RAP, RESURRECT THE PIONEERS TO GET THIS BACK ON TRACK. TEACH THE BABIES THIS IS THEIRS TO CONTROL, OR LIKE TUPAC AND BIGGIE WE'LL BE ONE DEAD SOUL!

The stairwell imbues a counternarrative of urban Black contemporary culture, acknowledge the struggles that have shaped Black America while centering the creative, joyful ways Black communities have come to thrive in a way that's heavy with nostalgia. The artwork constructs a narrative emphasizing to several principles at the foundation of Radical Truth's culture: authenticity, the will to stay true to one's self and community while not selling out to appease those in power; multiplicity, the will to blend multiple identities to translate knowledge across contexts; grit, the will to do what one has to do to make space for oneself in the world; and pride, the will to learn the stories of those who came before us and to pass those stories along to the younger generations. The space positions literacy as a means of self-realization, identity construction, and political power. By learning the artforms that comprise hip-hop culture, young black students might connect their own lived experiences, hopes, and desires to a larger tradition in a way that could allow them to claim and define their identity while shaping a future that honors the past. It also positions literacy as a form of rhetorical worldmaking that can build smaller worlds within larger worlds for people to heal, grow, and thrive despite all that that is wrong on the outside.

Once on the first floor, there's a hallway that connects the two spaces Radical Truth uses for performances, The Down Low and the Bebop Café. The Down Low is a typical venue for dances, raves, and concerts. It's a large, open, empty space with cement floors, tinted strobe lights, and mirror balls. The room is about 300 feet by 200 feet. The emptiness and versatility of this space allows it to be transformed in astonishing ways for events like poetry slam competitions: a raised stage is set up, along with several hundred folding chairs and a DJ booth. The production value is highly professional, and the mood is electrifying.

The Bebop Café's name reflects the contestable origins of slam poetry. Some say the art form emerged at the Nuyorican Poets Café on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Aptowicz 22; Urayoran 3). Others credit the Green Mill, a jazz club in Uptown Chicago (which was also my regular late-night neighborhood bar when I was in my 20s), as the birthplace of the genre (Pfeiler 100; Smith and Kraynak 11). As a gesture to satisfy both sides of this debate, The Bebop Café is named as an allusion to both cultural institutions. "Bebop," a style of mid-20th century jazz, gives nod to the Green Mill, while "café" refers to the Nuyorican. However, despite the name, The Bebop Café isn't a café at all. Rather, it resembles a suburban apartment complex rec room. The space is about 100 feet from front to back and about 25 feet from side to side. There's blue wall-to-wall carpeting, and the lighting is bright and fluorescent. Near the back, there's an orange pool table, which I've never seen used. On the left side of the room, there are about eight or ten high-top cocktail tables set up against windows that look out to a dimly lit hallway connecting The Bebop and The Down Low. Tonight, for

the opening reception, there's a microphone and a couple dozen folding chairs set up at the front of the room and a spread of snacks off to side.

People are beginning to filter into the room. Most know one another and are conversing in small groups throughout the room. This is my fifth and final year as a participant-observer in Radical Truth, and all the regular participants know me. I chat with some of them, and we engage in small talk about what we all did over the summer. The newcomers are shy and confused. Some talk awkwardly to one another about the trouble they had finding the place; others sit quietly by themselves near the back. Darryl, Radical Truth's founder and director, is buzzing around the room talking to as many people as he can as he wipes the sweat off his head. He talks with the other administrators in room, welcomes newcomers, hugs the most devoted participants, jokes with some of the young men, and offers personal advice to others. We make eye contact, and I walk over to say hello. I reach out to shake his right hand while I hook around to hug him. I wish him a sweet new year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he doesn't get the reference, and I tell him it's Rosh Hashanah and that I was feeling optimistic that good things are in store for us and the program this year. Darryl looks at me with a sense of dread in his eyes as he says something about how OMM should do more to support Jewish students on campus. He then moves on to talk with someone else.

After about ten more minutes of small talk and socializing, Darryl walks up to the microphone at the front of the room and the lights dim. It takes a few moments for the boisterous room to quiet down and for everyone to take a seat. Darryl greets attendees and describes the history of Radical Truth and how the program started with the goal of "promoting confidence in writing and performance" in 2007 when his position was

created at Seneca University. Prior to coming to Seneca, Darryl directed two other

spoken-word poetry programs in a large midwestern American city, one, Amplified

Voices, at a flagship state university, and the other, Black Verse, at a respected literary

center. Amplified Voices was only open to college students, but the space encouraged

participation from students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, Darryl

designed Black Verse to exclusively serve the city's Black community while encouraging

participation from poets of all ages and education levels. When developing programs at

Seneca University, Darryl sought to maintain a similar level of balance between

inclusivity and privacy. Radical Truth serves as an open space for anyone interested in

spoken word or slam poetry, and a second poetry program on campus, Nu Mu, served

as a closed space where membership is extended by invitation only. As such, Radical

Truth serves as a liminal space where students could gain an understanding of spoken

word poetry, and after they've developed a modest level of competence, earning

Darryl's trust, and learning the norms of the community, Darryl would invite them to be

initiated into Nu Mu.

Given that the main purpose of this event is to introduce the program to

attendees, Darryl first distinguishes Radical Truth from how poetry is understood in

more traditional academic spaces: "The English Department might have poetry, but we

have po-et-tree, living po-et-tree." By breaking down the word *poetry* into syllables and

introducing the concept of "living poetry," Darryl emphasizes the vernacular, ephemeral,

and evolutionary nature of slam poetry and spoken word. By positioning Radical Truth in

relation to the academic study of poetry, Darryl positions literary studies in the past,

centered on the practice of preserving a dominant Western tradition, disconnected from

the struggles and joys of life now in the present moment and, thus, dead. By contrast, he positions spoken word and slam poetry tools for survival in the present. "I am a poet," Darryl proclaims, "I don't just live, I love. Poetry saves lives. It inspires. It instructs. It engages. It is potential." This move anchors Darryl's understanding of the purpose and function of poetry as a means of establishing expectations and norms within Radical Truth. By thinking of living poetry as a practice that saves lives, inspires, instructs, and engages, participants are instructed that as Radical Truth poets, they'll learn how to inform such roles within the program. This kind of poetry centers lived experience and the wisdom that comes from such experience as a means of community building and an impetus for social action. If sociolinguistic scalar theory challenges us to see society as organized horizontally, across multiple centers of power, and vertically, in relation to social hierarchies (Blommaert; Blommaert and Leppanen; Stornaiuolo and LeBlanc), we can understand living poetry to be a way of moving across and between scales. This understanding of poetry can open new ways of understanding how spoken word and slam poetry can function rhetorically to draw connections between multiple points in space and time to influence culture, open space, and inspire action.

This idea of living poetry, as defined by an evolving survival strategy, appears repeatedly throughout the evening. While promoting Radical Truth's upcoming 10-Year Celebration, Daryll announces that the keynote speaker would be Saul Williams, a world-renowned spoken-word artist. Daryll said that his life changed when he heard Saul Williams' poem "Coded Language," and he urges the audience to look it up on YouTube. "That poem," he explains, "kept me from hurting somebody."

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"Coded language" is about how our concepts of reality, and our subjectivities within that reality, are the products of codes instilled through power structures via language and other sign systems. These sign systems, consistent with Althusser's notions of ideology and discourse, produce subjectivities. We use these sign systems to create the world; however, because these signs are connected to systems that are enforced/scaffolded by systems of power, they create limits and consequences. For instance, in the poem, Williams writes:

> Your current frequencies of understanding outweigh that which has been given for you to understand.
>
> The current standard is the equivalent of an adolescent restricted to the diet of an infant.
>
> The rapidly changing body would acquire dysfunctional and deformative symptoms and could not properly mature on a diet of apple sauce and crushed pears.

By comparing the post-modern American mind to a teenager raised on baby food, Williams illustrates how discursive systems (and the layering of institutional influence that creates them) limit how we can exercise desire, the possibilities we see for ourselves, and what we can become. It doesn't take much to imagine how profoundly such systems impact life in heavily stigmatized, marginalized, or oppressed communities, such as many working-class and poor Black communities. When people feel limited, when we can't meet our basic needs and determine our lives, anxiety and depression follow. If a person feels trapped within these systems, it makes sense how they would "want to hurt someone."

However, Williams does not see our identities as being determined by discursive

systems and cultural logics, and he locates agency in our ability to transcend the limits

of discursive systems of control. He writes:

> Find you mantra and awaken your subconscious
> Curve you circles counterclockwise.
> Use your cipher to decipher, Coded Language, manmade laws.
> Climb waterfalls and trees, commune with nature, snakes, and bees.
> Let your children name themselves and claim themselves as the new day for
> today. We are determined to be the channelers of these changing frequencies.

While Williams is not necessarily suggesting that people have the capacity to

think and act outside of discourse, he does suggest that people have the ability to

understand the limitations imposed by a given discourse, how those limitations influence

how others see us, how we see ourselves, and how we identify possibilities for action.

From being able to decipher social codes, we could make choices regarding which

discursive systems to align ourselves with. In the case of "Coded Language," Williams

finds solace and freedom by choosing to embrace a discourse rooted in nature and self-

determination instead of those oriented toward economics, the nation-state, and the

painful legacies that stem from colonial power. What Williams is advocating aligns with

Jan Blommaert's notion of sociolinguistic scales. Blommaert argues that the spaces we

inhabit are not neutral; instead, a complex layering of social norms defined by multiple

centers of authority, which he refers to as "orders of indexicality," affect how people can

access and communicate knowledge (2). At Radical Truth's 10-Year Anniversary

Celebration, Williams, who was the keynote speaker, said that poetry has the power to

blend discourses from different contexts in ways that many other forms of

communication cannot. In this sense, when Williams talks about the codes that give

language its cultural significance, he's too referring to orders of indexicality, and by

understanding how these orders of indexicality relate to vertical social hierarchies and horizontal centers of authority, people can analyze how language shapes spaces and affords (or limits) opportunity in those spaces. Blommaert uses the idea of sociolinguistic scales as a metaphor to illustrate "the layered and polycentric nature" of sociolinguistic processes to explain why some people can exhibit strong literate competencies in one setting but struggle in others (3). Blommaert argues that society is hierarchical and being able to move between and across scales, while understanding how knowledge is valued from space to space, is necessary to navigate the world (1). Moving between scales can be difficult for some people for a number of reasons, including discriminatory attitudes, negative past experiences, rigid ties to group identities and social histories, and a limited understanding of grammatic or generic conventions. These reasons often pertain to differences in values between competing centers of authority. Being able to identify the layered scales that organize social spaces, people can have a greater degree of control regarding how they define themselves. For Williams, as with Radical Truth, poetry is a process that can facilitate those scalar moves.

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Back at the reception, Darryl exemplifies Williams' ideas by sharing one of his own poems called "Camden" about the poverty and desperation in his home state of New Jersey in terms that make the violence visceral. One stanza of his poem reads:

> Burnt alive.
> Dump gasoline on people of color.
> The trigger killed my baby.
> Bloody parent in a state of shock.
> Shooter didn't know he killed his first born.
> Dumped by a system—dead and gore.

Darryl's depictions in the poem exemplify the dire outcomes that emerge in

environments when systems of control limit and oppress identities. His poem sketches a

dystopian nightmare, where family bonds have disintegrated; people feel disconnected;

lives are disposable; and where long-term systematic neglect and abuse have created a

dumpster fire of pain and torment. If literacy is a means of responding to life in a way

that builds connections and networks of support, Daryll's poem "Camden" shows what

the alternative is for those living in oppressive environments: despair, desperation, and

death. Despite what Daryll lived through in his younger years, the dystopian imagery of

the piece stands in contrast to the man we see before us at the opening night reception,

a college administrator dressed in a button-up shirt, a blazer, and a quirky bowtie

depicting the school mascot. If we think of literacy in the context of sociolinguistic

scales, the choices we make connect language to existing social structures. What

"Camden" represents is the absence of any sort of structure for people to connect their

ideas and experiences to make meaning. The imagery in the piece exists as fragments

of phenomenal happenings with no center of cultural gravity, the result of decades of

institutional neglect and decay. And yet, the knowledge Darryl carries from those

happenings is enough to disrupt other spaces, spaces like the opening night reception.

The poem itself presents information to the audience, which Darryl indexes in relation to

the systems and scales scaffolding the event in the context of the larger institution. By

doing so, he widens the scope of the shared culture within the space, creating the

possibility for greater inclusivity. It allows him to better communicate the knowledge he's

gained from his lived experience in a way that's intelligible to the others in the

community because it's connected to a mutually respected scale. It also provides a

thread by which others in the community could share their own experiences in neglected corners of society, creating opportunities for further meaning making and belong to emerge. This represents a contrast away from deterministic understandings of social structures. Rather than seeing this space as defined by a set curriculum, rigid programmatic outcomes, or even the effects of past trauma, the opening night reception is a living environment where language practices can shift cultural trajectories in ways that cannot easily be predicted or controlled.

Grounded in this idea of living poetry, Darryl continues to provide a history of the program while establishing community norms and conventions. To preface his discussion about Radical Truth's history, he says that "the arts can live when you have people engaging in it." Living poetry is directly tied to engagement. To not just survive but to thrive, one must have the courage and confidence to engage with others while reflecting on oneself until one's ideas materialize. He expresses frustration that Seneca University doesn't value the arts as much as he thinks it should, and because of that, Radical Truth was initially a hard sell to university administration. He proposed the program twice before OMM decided to allocate money for outreach. "There were pivotal moments," he says, "when I was paying for stuff out of pocket. Then the money came from co-curricular." In Radical Truth's early days, Darryl explains how he worked from 7:00 in the morning to 9:00 or 10:00 at night in order to get the program off the ground. Initially, Radical Truth was a small program comprised of only four students, two seniors and two freshmen. Darryl encouraged those four students to bring their roommates, and the group has grown from there. The program grew further in 2008 and 2009 through outreach efforts with Summer Span, Seneca University's summer bridge program.

During the summer of 2008, he recruited 20 students to join the program before the school year even started. That autumn, 150 students showed up for Radical Truth's first event, an open mic called Hometown Love, which has continued every year since.

To introduce Radical Truth's pedagogy, Darryl says, "it's in the weekly writers' workshops where community begins." Each semester, Radical Truth holds ten workshops where participants compose poems and receive feedback on their writing and performance style. Throughout the semester, there are open mic events where students can gain further practice developing their best pieces in preparation for the Mic Drop Poetry Slam competition, which concludes the semester. The workshops, as I'll explain in more detail later in this chapter, provide a liminal space where participants can be vulnerable; share their thoughts, feelings, and insecurities; and find the confidence needed to share what they know from their lived experience to the campus at large. Given that a community is a multidirectional social group that responds to the same set of exigencies, Darryl's assertion that community begins at the workshops makes sense. Through the process of writing and sharing poetry, participants are able to identify the dynamics impacting their lives and find support from others, which in turn allows participants to respond collectively and effectively to those dynamics. The process isn't always seamless. Like any community, Radical Truth is a space where membership and belonging are largely predicated on shared values, interests, and experiences. Still, the workshops do create an environment where those values can be negotiated, and where tensions between the individuals and the collective whole can be teased out, changing both in the process.

Speaking to both the exclusive nature of the group and the strong bonding that occurs through the program, Darryl says to the audience at the reception, "Poets, we family—from the page to the stage." The move presents Radical Truth, on one level, as a home away from home where students can feel comfortable speaking in vernacular dialects and where they can find the support needed to make sense of their pasts in the present moment. And through the process of writing and performing poetry, from moving to the page to the stage, and addressing all the vulnerabilities needed to do that, participants become loyal and trusted members of the community. To continue to build trust among participants, Darryl jokes saying, "I feel like Prince. I'm a fool in the workshops. You get to see this whole other side of me." By alluding to Prince, Darryl continues to downscale away from conventional notions of academic discourse to further establish the norm that while Radical Truth is situated in an institutional space, it is not bound by the same conventions as the classroom. All the while too, this use of indexing disrupts the rhetorical commonplaces that one would expect at school functions to define and assert the cultural norms of this community. Rather than performing some imagined academic or professional persona, poets can be "fools" in the safe confines of the poetry workshop without having to worry about such playful behavior being held against them. In doing so, Darryl presents Radical Truth as a liminal space where participants can practice transitioning between their home discourses and the discourses of the academy and mixing those discourses based on the rhetorical demands of any given future situation.

When defining the community norms in Radical Truth, Daryll introduces an idea of mutual support and reciprocity. He says, "What I do for poets is what they do for me."

He continues in third person saying, "Always be prepared around Daryll. The Chancellor might come in, and I be like, 'Destiny, come over here and spit a poem.'" While Daryll positions himself as an advocate for students and promotes Radial Truth as a space where students can find guidance for navigating the university, he is transparent about his expectation that help goes both ways, and that at times, he'll need students to perform for higher-level administrators to exemplify the value of the program. "In order to get love, you gotta show something," Daryll continues. "That's how we roll." Again, this relates to the idea that living poetry, living programs, and living communities stem from engagement. To "show love" to attendees, Daryll directs their attention to the back of the room to the pool table where he has placed some parting gifts: daily planners, Radical Truth t-shirts, and notebooks. He invites first-year students and anyone new to Radical Truth to take marble composition notebook, and he offers Moleskin notebooks to returning poets. This act of gifting achieves a number of goals. First, it establishes social norms, providing participants with the supplies needed to enter the community. Second, given the iconic nature of the marble composition notebook in slam poetry circles, the act folds participants into that social history. Third, it provides something tangible for the participants to associate with the opening night event, to remember going forward. And fourth, it creates relationship through a "living" understanding of reciprocity, rather than through bureaucratic processes that tend to define relationships in many other spaces within the university. Together, these gifts are outreach tools, ensuring that more students will actually continue on to the first workshop.

At the end of the evening, Darryl stares out to the audience with a glazed look in his eyes. Uncharacteristically nervous he says, "I said I wasn't gonna bring this out, but

back in March I found out I had cancer. I've been on chemo since March. I gotta operate

as if I'm alive. There's another light on the other side. How do you get through?" The

audience appears stunned and there is silence. I couldn't help but think back to the

beginning of the night, when Darryl looked at me with a sense of dread when I told him

it was Rosh Hashanah and I was feeling good about the new school year. As Darryl

steps off the stage, he's immediately surrounded by poets and friends lining up to hug

him and to show their love. The concern and care are palpable, exemplifying the bonds

and the relationships that form through these public acts of vulnerability.

The Workshops

To understand how Radical Truth functions to support participants' literacy

development, it's important to start by understanding the program's weekly writers'

workshops and its pedagogical foundation. Radical Truth hosts eight evening weekly

writing workshops throughout the semester. The first workshop begins four weeks into

the term, giving participants time to acclimate to coursework. The final workshop is four

weeks before the end of the semester, giving participants two weeks to prepare for the

Mic Drop Poetry Slam, the program's main event that ends the semester with two more

weeks left for students to complete coursework. Workshops are offered two days a

week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, to accommodate participants' schedules and to

foster a close, intimate environment conducive for sharing and personalized feedback.

Workshops are hosted in a classroom in one of the nicer historic buildings on campus.

On average, about 10 or 12 participants attend each workshop. That number could be

as few as three or as a many as two dozen, consisting of a mix of newer poets and long-time participants who show up every week.

Each workshop has a theme, which Daryll usually chooses earlier in the day. Sometimes the theme, such as *heavy heart*, reflects Darryl's mood. Other themes, like *I wish it would rain* are inspired by current events. Sometimes the theme, such as *hypnotize*, is a reference to a conversation that emerged in a prior workshop. On other weeks, the workshop will open with no specific theme and participants will collaborate on a theme together based on the collective mood and atmosphere in the room.

When workshops start, participants introduce themselves by sharing their names, preferred pronouns, hometowns, and an answer to an icebreaker question, such as "What's your favorite food? or "If your teeth could be made of any material, what material would you choose?" After the icebreaker, Daryll typically shares a poem or a YouTube video by an acclaimed poet. Daryll will usually choose a poet who reflects the social identities of the participants. In the first couple years, most participants were Black, and as such, Daryll showcased prominent Black poets, like Jessica Care Moore and Rudy Francisco. During my last couple years observing the program, Radical Truth became more popular with queer and Latinx participants, and as such, Daryll began showcasing more poets like Allen Ginsberg and Pablo Neruda. Daryll also uses this section of the workshop to address problems or concerns that may have emerged with participants. For example, in response to an Islamophobic interaction I witnessed at an open mic event[3], Daryll showed some poems about the everyday challenges of American Muslims, and we discussed how systematic forms of oppression silence

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[3] I will discuss this event in detail in the following chapter.

Muslims in ways that are both similar and different from the forms of oppression impacting other minority groups.

In the next part of the workshop, participants start the writing process. At this point, a participant volunteers to write the name of the weekly theme on the center of the board. From there, the other participants shout out ideas and terms related to that central theme, creating a mind map. Daryll refers to the terms on the board as "identities." For example, one workshop, when the theme was "hypnotize," some of the identities that participants shouted were "5,4,3,2,1," "*Ready to Die*," "falling in love," "loss of control," "you're getting sleepy," "snap," "magic," "gaze," "smoke and mirrors," and "repressed memories." Once the board is full of identities, Daryll chooses a poet, usually someone new to the program, to pick a random number between one and ten. At which point, everyone spends 20 minutes freewriting a poem, and whatever number the new poet chooses is the number of identities from the board that each participant is challenged to weave into their poem. After the time passes, everyone shares what they wrote. It's usually interesting to see the many directions participants take their poems, and by the end, they are typically far away from the original theme. Daryll then invites participants to read their work twice; after the first read, participants receive feedback on the content of their work, and after the second, they receive feedback on the performative elements of their work. After everyone has shared and received feedback, Daryll usually gives a few announcements for upcoming Radical Truth events before everyone leaves.

When I first started attending workshops, I found it odd that Daryll referred to the concepts that poets would add to the board during the pre-writing activity as *identities*.

This is very different from how people often speak about identity in popular discourses, as a static singular entity. However, using *identity* as a concept to describe the prewriting activity suggests that identity is not a category of being but a way of being. If the Radical Truth workshop is an event, then the ideas that participants add to the board are those that become present for writers in that moment. Based on the culture of community, the values and norms of the space, participants' past memories, and their hopes, needs, fears, and desires in the present, the words they call out and add to the board reflect how they are identifying possibility in that moment, a weaving of past, present, and future filtered through layers of power shaping the space.

Conversations in literacy studies emphasize how writing practices are shaped by social structures, or ecologies, that create spaces. For instance, Rebecca Lorimar Leonard's work shows that writers' literate abilities change from space to space because cultural values shift, affecting how writers are positioned in relation to systems of power (31), an idea that's compatible with the literature on sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert; Blommaert and Lappanen; Stornaiuolo and LeBlanc). The effects of this repositioning of subjectivity in relation to axes of power are felt viscerally. For instance, repeatedly throughout the book *Antiracist Writing Ecologies,* Asao Inoue claims that racist aspects of curricular writing assessment are felt viscerally among the Black and Hmong participants of his study. Inoue calls his readers to be more aware of how the layered social spaces where college writing is taught, composed, and assessed (which Inoue refers to as ecologies) are constructed to make better pedagogical choices (9). While the scope of Inoue's project relates to writing assessment specifically, his call could be expanded to any space where identity is constructed in relation to scales of

power. As another example of this, one of Lorimar Leonard's research participants, Sabohi, describes her experience working as journalist in Pakistan and as a principle at a private Islamic school in the United States. Sabohi, who is multilingual, earned a living from her ability to fluidly move between languages in Pakistan. In contrast, in the United States, while Sabohi can engaged with her students in multiple languages, her role as principles positions her to maintain a monolingual environment where everyone speaks English (95). Contrasting Sabohi's work in both Pakistan and the United States examples how she was positioned in two very different scales, embodying different sets of knowledge in both as determined by the bureaucratic processes mediating her life in those contexts.

By recognizing that all social spaces are constructed in relation to multiple axes of power and that those axes of power affect people viscerally, influencing how they use language in new ways, it's important to understand how quasi-institutional spaces, spaces like Radical Truth, function within larger ecologies. Understanding what writers identify—how they locate possibilities—from space to space is a good starting point for understanding how complex power structures shape subjectivities. For instance, at the hypnosis-themed workshop, participants wrote poems about childhood poverty, psychosis, gaslighting, phở, and Donald Trump. While these topics reflect experiences and concerns that are sincerely meaningful to participants, it would be a mistake to say that they are completely transparent about their lives in the confines of Radical Truth workshops (or that total transparency should be the goal of any space). Nonetheless, the workshops do afford participants a degree of privacy and a foundation of trust that enables them to share, a bit more openly, about the desires and experiences that

motivate them. As Daryll said at the Opening Night Reception, the workshops are where the community begins. This makes sense. If a community is a multidirectional social group that responds to a related set of exigencies, by creating a space where participants can feel comfortable writing and speaking openly about many of the dynamics shaping their lives, a group can identify what the common exigencies facing the collective whole, and thus might ideally be able to find ways of responding to those exigencies and supporting one another.

The Radical Truth

If we understand social spaces to be polycentric and layered, reflecting social histories and values that position subjectivities in ever changing ways, then literacy and identity both relate to how we navigate those spaces. Slam poetry is particularly helpful tool for blending and moving across scales. There was one workshop in particular that exemplified this when Daryll introduced a concept called *the radical truth*. The theme for that particular workshop was "heavy heart." Daryll chose the theme himself because it related to what he was experiencing battling cancer and contemplating death. He opened the workshop saying, "It's the beginning of the end for me," and to reflect his own fears and concerns, he shared a poem with the group called "A Lower East Side Poem" by Miguel Piñero, one of the early prominent spoken-word artists from New York City in the 1980s. As Piñero was preparing for his own death from AIDS, he wrote the poem as an homage to the neighborhood that shaped his life, for better and for worse, and in it, he asked that his ashes be "[scattered] thru the Lower East Side."

Sharing this poem served two purposes. First, it exemplified the concept of living poetry, that poetry is a daily practice that anyone can use to respond to life's daily joys and struggles. Piñero used poetry to grieve his life as his infection progressed, and Daryll is doing the same to find hope, energy, and strength as he lived day-to-day on chemo. In doing so, for Piñero and Daryll alike, poetry becomes a means of building community, of sharing struggles with others, connecting with those who may have survived similar experiences, and building trusting relationships. Second, "A Lower East Side Poem" serves as a segue into talking about Hometown Love, Radical Truth's first open mic of the year in which poets perform their own homages to the places that have shaped them in their own becoming. For many poets, boasting about where they're from comes easily. I don't think a single workshop or event passed without someone sharing their love for New York City. Yet, this is not the case for all poets. By moving away for college, some poets have left places that still evoke painful memories, perhaps hoping to never look back. To prepare these poets for Hometown Love, Daryll, by sharing Piñero's work, demonstrates how they could reframe a painful topic in a different way to find honor in hardship. Even though "A Lower East Side Poem" touches upon deep sorrows and injustices, it isn't a sad or an angry poem; rather, it is jubilant, an exaltation to community and an anthem for survival. By using it as a model text, the group was offered an example of how to write their own stories to find pride in experiences that were once cloaked in fear.

After discussing Hometown Love, the workshop moved into the prewriting exercise. From the theme, *heavy heart*, the poets identified concepts like "the unknown," "destruction," "broken," "carbon," "pulse," "Iraq War," "perpetual," "disaster,"

"veins," "police brutality," and "purpose." After twenty minutes of writing, we shared what we had written. After a poem about a finding solace while riding the subway, one participant, Charisse shared a poem that caught Daryll's attention. While hearing Charisse recite her work, I copied the following lines in my field notes:

> Broken glass and scars remain
> from a history yoked to a body.
> I take a hit off my pipe
> hoping to feel something—
> or nothing at all.
> Tonight I have a date with sankofa
> before I come back down
> before I turn the page.

When Daryll heard this poem, his eyes lit up, and he said that the student "got at the radical truth." Sankofa is a concept that emerged in what's now Ghana that emphasizes the gnawing desire to return to the past to find what's been lost, stolen, or forgotten as a means of moving forward (Quarcoo 17). Despite the term's premodern origins, it still resonates across the African diaspora as Black communities reckon with the effects of colonialism. More generally, the term seems to describe our postmodern subjectivities in a world where, as Marx and Engels predicted, "everything solid melts into air." Through alluding to sankofa, Daryll tells Charisse that the radical truth enabled her to "tap into something bigger" and "infuse meaning and life into [her] world." Daryll went on to tell the poets that getting at the radical truth was the point of writing poetry. "Poets are truth-sayers," he says. "That truth—we can't silence it—we have to let it out. The radical truth is that which speaks volumes to you. When you go to that space, you free that voice. Stamp, stomp, bring disruption to a space that's not freeing. You have poetic license not to censor your voice."

The radical truth locates truth outside of predictable, expected rhetorical formations. For most of the poets this meant honing in on of knowledge learned through lived, material experience in one setting that challenges the cultural values and the rhetorical commonplaces of another to bring about generative disruption. The radical truth is an important contribution to literacy studies for two reasons: 1) it illuminates how an attention to the layering of social power in any context addresses the limitations of literacy theories grounded in the idea of a discourse community, and 2), it provides a way of understanding literacy that extends beyond the goal-oriented framework that is so problematically engrained into our capitalist education system.

With regard to the first point, many contemporary theories of literacy are grounded in Brian V. Street's ideological model of literacy. For example, Shannon Carter builds upon Street's work to support her concept of rhetorical dexterity, which understands literacy to be a way of navigating "ever-changing rhetorical situations," as a goal for social mobility (19). Per Carter, people achieve rhetorical dexterity by gaining a critical awareness of how specific discourse communities value given genres of communication and rhetorical practices (59). While it's hard to argue with Carter's general objective that supports literacy development in a way that's fluid, responsive, adaptable, and effective, theorizing literacy and pedagogy in relation to discourse communities limits our understanding of how literacy actually functions in the world. Such critiques are not new. For instance, back in 2003, Paul Prior offered a noteworthy rebuttal to the discourse community lens arguing that it fails to address the inherent heterogeneity and ideological diversity that exists within any community. As a solution, Prior argues for a "laminated" understanding of literate practices due to the fact that

social groups are comprised of multiple worldviews and those worldviews are constantly in flux as people move across the various spaces they inhabit (15). As Prior shows that social contexts function as a lamination of heterogeneous ideologies, the concept of the radical truth shows that that lamination exists as the result of a layering of institutional influence, both explicit and implicit, in a given context. This layering has affective consequences that vary from person to person based on one's current social positionality and past experiences. As Audrey Lorde argues, poetry is "a revelatory distillation of experience" (37). By using the process of writing poetry to hone in on the radical truths we carry and present those truths in way that creates new spaces in community, we can understand rhetorical dexterity from a different angle, as a means of identifying how the layers of social power position people in any cultural context and distilling the narratives of our lives to gain exert agency in that context, knowing that that process is influenced by multiple and fragmented ideological framework and centers of social authority. Because institutions function within the scope of influence of other institutions (private colleges still receive federal funds), a lamented view of institutional power remains true in explicitly institutional spaces, community spaces, and all spaces in between.

While communities, organizations, and other social assemblages certainly operate under common shared beliefs and assumptions, doxa, the layering of institutional power in any context shapes the discourses that arises in complex, subtle, and multifaceted ways. For instance, laws and economic constraints shape nearly every social interaction though those high-level structures are rarely ever acknowledged; they're so ubiquitous we take them for granted despite their shapeshifting nature. And

furthermore, the histories and narratives individual people carry into any space reflect past experiences of institutionalization—even if those institutions are seemingly irrelevant to whatever activity is at hand—which nonetheless shapes the cultural elements of a space, and the ways people evaluate and respond to those spaces and the activities that occur within them. Of course, this involves the reading and writing practices people generally associate with literacy. Given these dimensions that shape spaces, what's necessary to increase writers' rhetorical dexterity, in addition to being knowledge about specific generic conventions and how they are valued, is a critical awareness of how layers of power function in specific contexts and how ideologically diverse assemblages of people negotiate those power dynamics to respond to whatever exigencies are at hand. However, there's a good reason why the discourse community lens—as overly simplistic as it is—still holds weight in the field: the alternative is complicated, messy, and difficult for many writers to grasp due to the fact that institutional power so often functions in seemingly invisible ways; it has structured and shaped our subjectivities throughout our entire lives. However, this idea of the radical truth provides insight into what such a pedagogy could look like. One goal for this project is to understand how layers of institutional power shape social contexts and how Radical Truth's programming enables students to navigate those dynamics in effective ways.

With regard to the second point, the radical truth provides a way of understanding literacy that responds to the limits of the capitalist, goal-oriented approach to American education by making space for other ways of knowing and being. As evidenced by the widespread application of activity theory as a lens for

understanding writing in the field and the increasing dominance of technical communication in rhetoric and composition programs, it's nearly become doxa that writing is a goal-oriented activity, deemed successful or not in relation to whether it accomplishes a writer's goals by eliciting the right calculus of social action. From this framework, it's easy to understand rhetorical dexterity as a term pertaining to a writer's ability to meet pre-determined outcomes. I don't take fault with this lens in and of itself; working and writing with other people to meet established objectives is an unavoidable fact of life and learning to do so more effectively would make anyone's life easier. However, a future-, goal-oriented approach to education, literacy, and life is not without problems and complexities. While the institutional structures of the past three centuries have begotten unparalleled innovation and social progress, those same structures have put into motion a cultural trajectory that's accelerating too fast for the very same institutions to adapt to, creating our present era of perpetual crises. Given how current discourses emerging from social and news media and governmental and educational institutions are marked by that same sense of constant crises, it's no wonder that we also live in an era of widespread anxiety and depression. What's more, theoretical frames that orient activity solely toward goals and the future can lead to constant feelings of inadequacy as they focus attention to that which we are lacking, creating an addictive mindset where nothing is ever good enough. And given the ability of artificial intelligence to compose texts, synthesize ideas, and analyze data at a level that rivals many humans (Adams and Chuah; Godwin-Jones; McKnight), theories of literacy centered too closely on goals could prevent us from understanding the value of writing outside of predetermined systems. What we need now is a theory of literacy that

functions to guide writers in meeting goals and social collaboration, of course, but also in finding a sense of grounding and stability in an increasingly fragmented world.

Radical Truth, the program, and radical truth, the concept, could shed light on what such a theory might be. Audrey Lorde suggests that realigning our attention away from goals and future trajectories means understanding life as a "situation to be experienced and interacted with" rather than as "a problem to be solved" (37). The difference here is subtle, but Lorde calls us to see writing—and poetry in particular—as a way of understanding how our bodies and lives are situated in specific moments and how that situatedness affects our visceral responses to our surroundings, which are connected to our needs and desires. Lorde sees the process of writing poetry as a practice that's essential for our survival—because it allows people to tap into the source of their power and frame it in a ways that begets meaningful action (37). Being able to recognize the source of our power means attuning ourselves to the core motives that shape our actions and understanding how those motives align with the socio-cultural dynamics mediating life in the present, so we can respond in a way that could be understood by others. This process is both visceral—requiring an understanding of how our physical bodies respond to certain situations—as much as is analytical and rhetorical—requiring a critical awareness of how power structures construct those situations and situate subjectivities within them.

Given the needs of our current era, what I hope to develop through this project is a theory of literacy that can account for temporal orientations to the past, present, and future alike; one that can guide writers as they work with others to achieve goals and navigate the world but to understand the sources of their power and their motives in a

ways that begets a stronger senses of identity, belonging, and connection with others;

and one that is grounded in the assumption that the spaces we inhabit are ideologically

and discursively fragmented, mediated by multiple layers of institutional influence.

Studying slam poetry as a genre could lead us closer to articulating what such a theory

could be because it can easily blend multiple discourses and dialects, reflecting and

responding to the inherent multiplicity in any space. By tapping into the radical truth—

the source of our power, the visceral knowledge engrained into our subjectivities—and

finding discursive openings to share that truth with others, allows writers to understand

and navigate the complex, shape-shifting layers of social power. But moreover, it allows

writers to craft and establish a sense of identity within complex social assemblages, and

essential skill in a world in crisis.

The Process Become Part of You

While layers of power influence literacy practices and how identities are

actualized in particular contexts, this phenomenon relates just as much to past

processes of institutionalization as much as it does to present dynamics. This explains

how the same social processes can situate different people in different ways, begetting

different outcomes. To understand this phenomenon, it's important to understand the

difference between two terms, dispositional narrative and foundational narrative, and

how they both pertain to literacy and identity construction. My use of the term

disposition builds on the conventional use of the term while drawing attention to the

socio-cultural factors that shape our ways of being in the world. This concept is linked to

Bourdieu's habitus, in that it highlights how ways of being are inscribed into our bodies

through social process, and Heidegger's Dasein, in that it highlights how we align past memoires, the focus of our attention in the present, and how we imagine the future. Yet rather than understanding this disposition as being something static that individuals are locked into, I draw on my concept of foundational narratives to explore the way that stories allow individuals to see possibilities in their lives.

One workshop that made this distinction salient was when Darryl demonstrated a practice he uses—referred vaguely as putting the poet "in the middle"—to build confidence on an embodied level. That workshop began with Darryl feeling upset about a terrorist attack that had occurred the day prior in New York City. Someone drove a truck into a crowd of cyclists and joggers killing eight. The terrorist had been living in Darryl's hometown, and Darryl was worried about the social repercussions that the event could bring to the community. Because he was feeling down, Darryl said he wanted a fun theme for that night's workshop to distract from the news of the day. After a few poets throw out some ideas, we decided upon "mixtape," a theme that reflects the complex, fragmented aspects of postmodern life and the creative ways in which people reshape the past. As usual, we generated ideas about terms and concepts that we associate with "mixtape," such as "old school," "summer," "ex-girlfriend," "new love," "graduation," "memories," "glitter glue," "funk," "playlist," and "analog," and we had our usual twenty-minute free-write.

After the free-write, Aaliyah wrote a poem called "Remix Poetry" about the importance of friendship in her life; how she uses fashion to express herself; and how she adjusts her daily routines based on her mood. As much as life changes, as "Remix Poetry" explains, certain core aspects of ourselves and the pattens by which we

respond to the world remain consistent overall even if they might change from one day to the next. The poem was rich in allusions to 1990s hip-hop culture. It was fun, energetic, relatable, and original. The poem captured Darryl's attention, and he immediately told Aaliyah that she'd be performing it at Radical Truth's 10-Year Anniversary Celebration event later that semester. At that point, we went around the room giving Aaliyah feedback on her work. Carla told her, "Poems are elements; don't be nonchalant about your art." Stanley said, "This poem is fire." Rose asked Aaliyah who her influences are and whom she's been reading. She then urged Aaliyah to do more to reflect the styles of her poet role models.

Next to share after Aaliyah was Stanley, a sophomore who had been attending workshops sporadically for the past two years. He wrote a poem about his dysfunctional relationship with his girlfriend, Ladonna, which he nervously recited while sitting in his chair:

> Every time I close my eyes,
> I hear your voice echoing in my mind.
> Critiques crescendo
> watching, waiting, aching inside.
> Each move I make is new addition
> to a litany of complaints and premonitions.
> I can't do nothin' without your suspicions.
> You suck my oxygen.
> Like I'm a lion in your cage,
> I am castrated; I am chained.
> I've all but forgotten my own name.
> You say you'll love me 'till the day you die, but
> girl, you a thorn in my side.

Upon hearing the poem, Darryl had Stanley recite it again with more emotion and feeling. However, the second reading was just as tepid as the first with the only difference being that Stanly's voice was marginally louder when reciting the first couple

lines. "I know what to do," Darryl quipped without missing a beat right when Stanly finished. "Get in the middle, Stanly," he said. The room was arranged with eight nine-by-two-foot folding tables forming a square with the dozen or so with participants evenly spread around the perimeter. Stanley ducked under the tables and stood up in the center of the room. "Now Stanley," Darryl said, "I want you to read your poem again, but this time I want you to look each of us in the eyes once as you perform your piece. Move around the middle, and after each line, look at a different person."

Stanley began reciting the poem with a nervous smile on his face. "Every time I close my eyes," he begins—he busts out laughing. "I can't do this, D," he says, looking at Darryl with exhaustion.

"Yes, you can." Darryl replies. "Just go slow, line by line, looking each of us in the eyes."

"Every time I close my eyes, I hear your voice echoing in my mind. Critiques crescendo, watching, waiting, aching inside." Stanley tries to perform the poem, moving around the inside of the square, looking at each of us. "Each move I make is new addition to a litany of complaints and premonitions. I can't do nothin' without your suspicions." Each line of the poem was recited a bit differently. At times, Stanley appeared shameful, then neutral, and then sad. Other times, he struggled to find his place in the poem, groping for words from memory or stopping to read off the page. "You suck my oxygen like, ugh, a lion in your cage. I, I, I am castrated. I'm chained." Stanley looked physically uncomfortable as he reached the end of the poem. "I've all but forgotten my own name. You say you'll love me 'till the day you die, but-girl-you-a-thorn-

in-my-si—." He blurted out the last lines particularly fast with the hope that this exercise would soon be over. But Darryl was not through with him yet.

"Aaliyah, get in the middle too," he directs. "Pretend to be Ladonna." Aaliyah slides over the table and hops in the middle of the room looking perky and eager to participate. "Listen, Stanley," Darryl says, "I know you wanna get this all done with, but you need it. The process becomes part of you, and it'll make you try harder." Stanley slumps his shoulders and looks to the floor with a sense of defeat. Aaliyah stands focused, eyes fixated on Darryl, ready for her instructions. "Now Stan, this time when you read your poem, I want you looking at Aaliyah but imagine that it's Ladonna standing there. Chad and Danielle—you both jump in too." We hop over the tables and stand next to Aaliyah. Speaking to the two of us, Darryl says, "You gotta make faces to throw him off his game—nonverbal distractions. Be like demons or ghosts. Just do what you gotta do."

Stanley takes a deep breath and starts his poem again. "Every time I close my eyes, I hear your voice echoing in my mind." This time his tone is sterner as he speaks from his diaphragm. "Critiques crescendo, watching, waiting, aching inside." Meanwhile, Aaliyah is standing with her right palm resting on her hip looking as if she owns the room as Danielle and I sway around making vague hand gestures and contorting our faces like we're entertaining a fussy infant. It must look ridiculous, but our antics seem to be getting to Stanley, and his voice grows angry and passionate. "Each move I make is new addition—to a litany of complaints and premonitions." He stops to take a breath and shouts, "I can't do nothin' without yo' suspicions," as he points toward Aaliyah pretending to be his soon-to-be ex-girlfriend. When he talked about feeling castrated

and chained, he does so now with a sense of authority, as if he were taking back what had been lost and reclaiming his sense of worth in the relationship. Aaliyah's body language shifts as well. She's no longer towering over us with a haughty grin on her face. Instead, she stands relaxed with her arms crossed over her stomach, her head cocked a bit to the left as she peered at him through slightly squinted eyes. Danielle and I step up our game and move closer to him, getting in his face to keep up the agitation. Stanley seems exhausted, frustrated, but empowered as he nears the end of the poem, "You say you'll love me 'till the day you die." He takes another dramatic breath, puts his right hand in the air, palm facing outward, as if to shut us up, "but girl," he says, "you a thorn in my side." He lowers his hand, turns his back, ducks under the table, and gets back to his seat. Two weeks later he announces that he and Ladonna had decided to go their separate ways.

Darryl repeatedly says that the purpose of Radical Truth to build students' confidence through performing poetry, and reflecting that purpose, he "puts poets in the middle" whenever they lack the confidence to do something pressing and specific to take control of their lives, much like Stanley who initially lacked the confidence to end his relationship with Ladonna. Putting a poet in the middle is not an everyday activity in the workshops, but it usually happens about once or twice a semester. The last time Darryl put a poet in the middle prior to Stanley was that past spring when a new poet named Genevieve wrote a poem about her hope to someday come out as lesbian to her conservative, Catholic, Mexican grandmother. Similar to what went down with Stanley, Darryl had Genevieve perform her poem in the middle of the room as her friend Angelica pretended to be Genevieve's grandmother. Genevieve was in tears as she told

her "grandmother" that she'd risk eternity in hell for the chance to experience true love.

The only difference between Genevieve's experience and Stanley's was that instead of

having Genevieve look us all in eye as she recited her work, he had us all put our heads

down on the table and then look up at Genevieve once she had said something that

resonated with us. By doing so, Genevieve would know which parts of her poem were

the most impactful, so she could revise her delivery to emphasize those sections with

more energy. Prior to Genevieve, I've seen Darryl support students by putting them in

the middle before they've gone on to confront an abusive parent and report a sexual

assault.

In all these cases, for poets, getting "put in the middle" is an identity-building

activity. If we consider identity to be an alignment of desire, motive, and action in a

particular context, and that any act of self-determination, as Audre Lorde wrote, is

always "fought with danger (42)." Simply put, the activity allows students to overcome

fear to define themselves on their own terms in the context of Radical Truth and their

relationships within the program, which they might use as a springboard to define

themselves elsewhere. For instance, Stanly embodied a submissive role in his

dysfunctional relationship, which was causing him much stress and unhappiness. By

performing in the middle, he was able practice reframing the narrative surrounding that

relationship in a way that would allow him to speak up for himself and earn the respect

he deserves. Likewise, with Genevieve, going in the middle provided her the opportunity

to negotiate and reconcile her US American, Mexican, Catholic, and lesbian identities in

a way that allowed her to come one step closer to understanding what those categories

mean in the context of her own life and how they coexist with one another. Through

being vulnerable and open and then asserting oneself from that point of vulnerability in this space, the poets are seen by others in new ways. That visibility becomes the foundation for new social roles that they can take forward elsewhere.

Being "in the middle" is a different experience compared to reading a poem out loud from one's seat because it requires that the poet directly engage other people: they look them in the eye, they use their entire bodies to perform their work, and they respond to the body language of the audience. If memories are held in our bodies and our muscles remember the feelings and emotions tied to those memories, then actively engaging others to create new experiences to associate old memoires can be deeply healing. I've learned that there's oftentimes a difference between what our bodies know—the dispositions we embody—and the narratives we tell ourselves as we navigate the world. I use the term "disposition" synonymously with Bourdieu's concept of habitus to describe how people have been conditioned to respond to the world around them. As Blommaert summarizes, habitus is how past history affects present behavior (9). When understanding habitus, or dispositions, in the context of conversations about embodiment and literacy, it's important to highlight that the formation of habitus is rooted in affect, which we can understand by way of Heidegger's concept of Dasein, which can also be seen as a form of disposition. For Bourdieu, habitus is established through repeated rituals and routines that inscribe beliefs and values into our physical bodies through the creation of muscle memory. Muscles become conditioned to the physical elements of the ritual, while a person's mind associates that deep physical learning to the values and narratives connected to those actions and the social relationships that develop in the spaces where those rituals

happen. So even when after the ritual is over, the resulting muscle memory and the beliefs and values associated with it become the foundation of how a person responds to the world thereafter. However, past rituals do not account for the entirety of our embodied disposition. To Heidegger, our way of being in the world is shaped by emotion, most importantly fear, which determines how we focus our attention in the present and how we imagine future possibilities. Taking these two ideas in tandem, how people discover possibilities and actualize them is connected to what their bodies have physically experienced and the emotions that linger onward from those experiences when that muscle memory is evoked. In this sense, the ritualistic aspect of institutional processes is a simulation of the experiences one might have outside the scope of the institution itself, hence Deleuze's theory that institutional processes function to shape desire in a controlled environment to allow consistent and intelligible communication between people.

However, the way people choose to live and how possibilities emerge is also connected to the stories we tell to navigate the world and we connect our stories to the histories that organize the cultures that structure our lives. In the writing workshops I facilitate, I use the term "foundational narrative" to describe the core stories that people themselves as they navigate the world, and we adapt these stories to fit given contexts, aligning those narratives with the histories of given communities, shaping those narratives—and the hopes and the desires that stem from them—to pertinent genres and discursive conventions.

Developing a stable sense of self requires an alignment between a person's disposition and the foundational narratives they use to guide their life. The function of

the foundational narrative, our core stories, is to explain why we respond to the world the way we do; how we arrived at the present moment; and what we need to survive and ideally thrive going forward. In this sense, the foundational narrative is not a facet of habitus, or our disposition, but a way of either explaining or distracting from it. When a person's disposition and foundational narrative are not aligned, there's a gap between what a person feels and what they think; between what they believe to be true and what their body knows to be true. As a result of this gap, one might doubt their own judgment, distrust other people, struggle to make decisions, or have difficulty focusing their attention. All of which could lead to more severe outcomes, like anxiety and depression.

The misalignment between disposition and foundational narrative explains why literacy abilities can vary so much from space to space. Our dispositions relate to our values. What we've experienced in the past often determines what we need to thrive and come into a sense of wellness and freedom in the present. Our dispositions determine the kinds of environments and spaces that are best for us, and as such, how we evaluate our surroundings. Because social spaces are polycentric, reflecting multiple layers of institutional influence and an ever increasing, ever fragmenting array of social histories—all of which relating to different matrixes of values—these social dynamics will evoke different emotional responses depending on what a person has experienced in the past. And as we know from Heidegger, that will affect what a person identifies and how they focus their attention. Thinking of identity in terms of how people focus attention pertains to how people make use of literacy skills. As bodies feel social spaces and the values those spaces imbue, it follows that people would restructure our narratives in a way to deemphasize aspects of our lived experiences that are misallied

with what's valued in a particular context; we do this to avoid stigma and marginalization. However, this results in the creation of foundational narratives that don't easily create facets into the knowledge, experience, needs, and desires as determined by our pasts, making communication difficult and overwhelming.

This distinction between the dispositional narrative and the foundational narrative is particularly salient regarding Stanley's experience practicing his poem in the middle of the room. Initially, the workshop's theme was *mixtape* with the intent on begetting happier poems, but the terms the students identified to put on the board dealt with issues related to relationships, which Stanley latched on to as a springboard to explore his current relationship problems. It's very typical in Radical Truth workshops for participants to write on subjects that are very different from the workshop's theme. The theme is simply a starting point, and the collection of terms that participants add to the board are meant to jog their memory, lead them to think outside the usual foundational narratives they use to guide their lives, and find new inroads into exploring and articulating what they have experienced and know. Stanley's poem about his relationship with his girlfriend and this way of initially reciting it was indicative of both the narratives he uses to understand his role in the world and his general disposition, both of which being wrapped in feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, and shame. While I never knew Stanley well enough to understand his backstory, these aspects of his disposition were apparent by the way he conducted himself; his body language; and the tone, volume, and speed of his delivery. For Stanley, just telling the story of his relationship with Ladonna wasn't enough for him to shift his dispositional narrative in a way that would allow him to identify a healthier, happier path forward. He needed no

realign his body to associate his experiences with Ladonna with emotions other than powerlessness. That's why Danielle and I had to provoke him as he recited: we had to arouse some other emotion, in this case anger, to break him out of his core disposition to not just imagine a new future for himself but to feel it.

The transformation I saw with Stanley performing his piece in the middle is consistent with contemporary scholarship in community literacy studies. Kate Vieira claims that through the interplay of narrative and metaphor, genres of writing such as memoir have healing potential because they align the mind the body. According to Vieira's research, narrative is an important concept because it allows people to create a sense of order from events that might otherwise be chaotic or disjointed (25). She argues that metaphor too is a powerful tool for healing because it enables writers to reframe experiences from a different lens; for instance, seeing a shameful experience as empowering (28). However, Vieira questions how social dynamics can support or limit healing in community writing spaces, and she calls for more research on this topic that is "sensitive to power and context" (35).

In response to Vieira's call, I believe it's important to understand how the concepts of habitus and Dasein relate to how identities form and are reconstructed. Again, habitus shows how dispositions emerge from repeated cultural processes, but Dasein reminds us that our way of being in the world, and how we identify possibilities as we move through the world are largely rooted in affect and mainly shaped by fear. When people experience fear, a fight-flight-freeze response is triggered, which limits our ability to respond to situations to the fullest extent of our ability. Instead, we operate on instinct alone. We're unable to realize the available means of persuasion. All

institutional and social processes evoke affective responses to varying degrees; as social beings, we all instinctively fear marginalization, and we are acutely attuned on a subconscious level to how power is layered from space to space and the potential consequences for transgressing norms in a given space. That's why, as part of the learning process in formalized educational settings, teachers guide students as they apply principles to overcome that fear in a controlled environment. In doing so, the principles become inscribed into the body in a way that's associated both mentally and somatically with empowerment and overcoming. It's important to be aware of how power functions in particular contexts because not everyone experiences fear in the same ways. Aspects of past conditioning of the body, rather through socialization, institutionalization, or sporadic experiences, could amplify affective elements of any process or evoke affective responses that are unexpected or outside of the scope of consideration for those involved in organizing a given writing space.

These institutional, cultural, and social dynamics that layer affective elements, including fear, in any social context is part of the reason why the narratives we tell ourselves to make sense of and navigate the world can, over time, deviate from the truths and experiences our bodies hold. This is an idea reflected in Staci Hanes' book *The Politics of Trauma*, which explains how healing from trauma involves an understanding of how somatic sensations are connected to social structures and systems of power. This explains why people often change how they talk about their lives to avoid stigmatization and marginalization and to align themselves with the standards of a given social context, even if that leads to gaps between the narratives they tell and the dispositions they embody. When we cannot share the truths of our lives, when we

must hide the wisdom and knowledge we've gained from our lives; when we cannot

communicate our needs, it's easy to fall into depression and anxiety, this is the nature of

oppression. However, pressuring students reveal all of themselves in curricular settings

where grades are involved is highly problematic. This speaks to the importance of

quasi-institutional and community-based writing programs that are not limited by the

space dynamics as the formal classroom.

Given that Radical Truth's location as a quasi-institutional space provides

affordances that the classroom does not in helping students reconstruct identity. Given

that accreditation, grades, tests, and required assignments are not part of Radical

Truth's curriculum, the program avoids many of the elements that might evoke negative

attitudes among students who have had complicated experiences with classroom

learning in the past. Particularly for urban domestic Black students, the spaces that

compose the program evoke some degree of cultural familiarity that could allow

students to engage with space with a greater degree of confidence. And even for

students who perform well in the classroom, the casual aspect of Radical Truth

workshops and events allows students to discuss topics like sex and religion that might

be seen as taboo in the classroom. Between these elements, the program excels with

regard to establishing a higher degree of trust between the participants who stay with

the program. This trust facilitates the vulnerability needed for participants to share

aspects of their lives that they might not feel comfortable sharing elsewhere in order to

reshape the narratives that structure their lives. But furthermore, this trust is also the

impetus by which participants like Stanley and Genevieve were able to experience

performing their pieces in a way that allows them to respond to their words and actions

around them with emotional honesty, without holding anything back, creating the potential for a reconditioning of muscle memory that could facilitate a change in disposition and an unlearning of the past. Given the current challenges facing society: climate change, automation, artificial intelligence, mass migration, and political instability, we're all going to need to learn how to recondition our bodies and shift our narrative away from how we've become accustomed to see the world based on how we were socialized in the past.

However, while the curricular structure of Radical Truth workshops, including putting poets in the middle, offers exciting potential in some literacy and writing spaces, I would still be cautious regarding when and how these methods are used. While some effective teachers can certainly build trust and community in the classroom, grades still affect how people engage with the space—the affect the values that are reified and felt within a space. Without Stanley's trust and without Daryll's experience, the activity of putting a poet in the middle could certainly be humiliating rather than healing, especially in a context where grades are involved. Stanley wrote his piece and learned how to perform in because he wanted to be free from Ladonna and he trusted Daryll's help to do that—not because he wanted to pass a required class or earn a degree.

4. If They See That, They'll Destroy Us: Structural Change and the Politics of Inclusivity

In many ways, Radical Truth's culture regarding race is a mirror image of the academy. While the program is technically open to all students, it's clearly a Black space. Black students comprise a plurality of Radical Truth participants; the vast majority of the program's decision makers are Black; the program's pedagogy is rooted in Black artistic practices; and the program's physical spaces are decorated and designed to reflect the history of Black America, primarily through celebrating hip-hop's Golden Age. For the most part, as a white gay man, I've always felt accepted and embraced at Radical Truth's events, and by the end of my time in the program, I co-facilitated workshops with Daryll and substituted for him on days when he could not attend. Poets would regularly assume I was either a Radical Truth alum who had returned to help with the program or a staff member in the Office of Multicultural Matters (OMM). I gave a speech about the impact of the program on my life at Radical Truth's 10-year Anniversary Celebration, and even now, I still write poems to navigate the stresses of life and weave together constellations of past memories to imagine new futures. I'm thankful for having learned how to do that. This level of involvement shows just how much I was a part of the community. However, perhaps due to my racial identity, I never felt that this was *my* space—and I never wanted it to be. I saw the value the program had for Black students at Seneca University, even for those who did not attend events, and I believed it was important to have such unapologetically Black spaces.

Community literacy studies holds inclusivity among the most cherished ideals, and literature in the field seeks to understand how to develop administrative and pedagogical practices to make writing spaces within, outside, and in between academic institutions more inclusive despite the social and political dynamics that often hinder those efforts. When taken together, these conversations study inclusivity in the context of making predominately white spaces more accessible to BIPOC people and others from marginalized or under-represented backgrounds for the purpose building more equitable spaces and raising awareness of problematic power structures that prevent social progress. For example, focusing on nonacademic activist writing spaces, Randolph Cauthen suggests that community organizers use Burkeian rhetorical theory to deconstruct divisive symbolism as a means of building more inclusive political movements (166-167). In the context of service learning and university-community partnerships, Simone Davis and Barbara Roswell argue that critiquing pedagogical assumptions can make spaces more inclusive for students of diverse backgrounds (3); and Elenore Long and her colleagues argue that service learning can be more racially inclusive by rooting collaboration in reciprocal cross-cultural inquiries (229). Focusing on academic contexts, Catherine Savini argues that offering retreats for teachers and administrators to reflect on prompts related to racial inclusivity could help achieve more equitable writing spaces (161). And taking a more nuanced approach, Natasha Jones draws off Patricia Collins' theory of power to argue that making spaces more inclusive requires an understanding of how infrastructure, ideology, disciplinary practices, and interpersonal interactions are all interconnected in a given context (6). While the inherent value of inclusivity is an unspoken assumption in the literature, if the purpose of

building inclusive spaces is grounded in power and equity, one wonders if predominantly Black spaces or space rooted in Black traditions like Radical Truth have the same imperative for inclusivity? If we think of inclusivity in terms of power and equity, might making spaces like Radical Truth more inclusive actually take away from the value and opportunities it provides Black students in the context of the university as a whole? And are there other ways of considering inclusivity outside questions of power that would make Radical Truth and programs like it stronger and more effective anyway?

These questions are important to me in my own life now as I'm involved in various capacities with a gay men's organization that aims to be more trans inclusive; a harm reduction organization that wants to be more BIPOC inclusive; an HIV/AIDS organization that wants to better engage for sex workers and drug users; and a community writing organization that wants to better engage people who have experienced incarceration. While issues related to power and equity are still very much at the foundation of the drive for inclusivity in each of these contexts, they're all quite different, and except for Jones, none of the scholarship I've reviewed in the field provides satisfying answers regarding how to move forward in way that would be long-lasting and impactful. The fact that so many organizations are seeking to be more inclusive is indicative of the extent to which questions about inclusivity are relevant in contemporary society, and studying inclusivity in the context of Radical Truth, a Black-centered quasi-institutional space, could beget a more nuanced way of theorizing and understanding inclusive practices that could be applied across contexts.

Jones' framework has shaped the institutional ethnographic lens I'm using to study and analyze Radical Truth. By applying Jones's framework to my data, this chapter will engage Radical Truth's public-facing events to analyze how the structure of the program relates to the larger structure of Seneca University and society at large; how communities outside Radical Truth engage with the program; and how poets engage with communities outside the program. In doing so, I discuss the affordances and limitations of inclusivity in Radical Truth and how the program's structure and pedagogy might lead us to consider inclusivity in new ways to make better choices in the spaces where we work and live.

Hiya China: An International Open Mic of the Future

One event in which the layering of institutional power and its effect on identification was most apparent was "Hiya China: An International Open Mic of the Future." The event was held in the recently refurbished Swenson Theater, one of the smaller performance spaces on campus, which could comfortably seat a group of about 150 people. Carla (they/them) and their best friend Angelica were the MCs hosting the event. The turnout was rather light: I counted eighteen people in attendance, mostly all Radical Truth participants, sitting in small clusters spread around the auditorium. Some attendees were dressed in casual athletic wear, while others were dressed more stylishly as if they were going out dancing. There were two student photographers from the campus newspaper and what seemed to be a professional photographer hired by the university to document the event. Angelica and Carla circled around the auditorium checking in with the people in attendance, most of whom they knew well, keeping a

roster of performers. A group of four young Muslim hijabi women, members of a poetry club at the local community college who sporadically attend Radical Truth events upon Daryll's invitation, enter the auditorium and sit in the row in front me, about two-thirds of the way to the back of the room. Carla and Angelica approach the new attendees to see if they'll be performing or listening. I note the smell of vodka on their breath. One of the community college students, Faduma, signals her interest to perform. Carla hands her the clipboard and dangles the pen in front her face while saying, "go ahead, do it, sign your soul away," while Angelica giggles at Carla's side, echoing the taunts. Faduma and her friends, whose faces are outside my line of vision, seem unphased. Faduma adds her name to the roster, and the MCs retreat back toward the stage. I am disturbed and embarrassed.

All the administrators from the Office of Multicultural Matters and a few administrators from other offices were in attendance as well, including one who works under the provost. They were clustered around the front of the room to the right side of the stage, near an emergency exit. Between the stage and the crowd was a remote-controlled 360° camera operated by Darryl, and near the back of the stage, behind the MCs, was a screen projecting the live image of a couple dozen high-school students in Shanghai, China, where it was 7:00 in the morning. They were dressed in blue and white uniforms, sitting erect and motionless in front of red- and gold-paneled walls. Standing in front of the seated students on screen was Mandy, a Radical Truth alum, who graduated the year prior and started a job teaching English in China. Mandy and Daryll had organized the event together. Signaling the beginning of the open mic, Carla and Angelica walk on stage. Carla faced the screen to salute Mandy and the Chinese

students, too drunk to realize they were turning their back on the video camera and, as such, their Chinese audience, possibility giving the impression that the gesture was more performative for the Americans than an act of international comradery. They turned around again, facing the camera and both audiences, and declared, "Congratulations, we are officially in China!" as the American audience clapped with mild enthusiasm.

Hiya China was touted as an international poetry slam made possible by 21st Century technology, and Daryll had been preparing for it for months. While he did little to promote the event outside of OMM's programs, he heavily promoted it within the scope of the community by making announcement at all the workshops, sending out emails to participants, and posting reminders about the event on Radical Truth's social media accounts, telling the poets repeatedly that they could put it on their resumes. There was no doubt that the event was important for OMM, and out of loyalty to the program, almost all the regular poets showed up to represent Radical Truth. After Carla and Angelica cracked a few jokes about the Brooklyn-Queens rivalry back home, as is typical of all Radical Truth events (but no doubt lost on those participating on the other side of the world), they called the first performer, Clarissa, to the stage to recite a piece titled "The Beach Is My Muse." Clarissa, dressed in black skinny jeans, a forest-green velour blouse, and sporting several silver rings, deviated from the spoken word genre in favor of a more traditional structure with rhyming couplets. The poem describes the sense of awe she feels when looking out at the vastness of the sea at sunset. The audiences on both sides of the world clapped politely after the poem ended, though I wonder how much of Clarissa's piece was intelligible to the Chinese poets without a

translator present. On the screen, two students in China rose from their seats and walked toward to the microphone. They recited a poem together in Chinese. The sound quality was poor and muffled. As there had been no prior conversations on how to address the language differences, the audiences were left to politely clap to show their respect even though it was clear the Americans didn't understand the piece.

Back at Seneca University, Rose, a sophomore, dressed reminiscently of a 1950s housewife, with shiny black Mary Janes, a modest blue and white gingham dress, a pearl necklace, and her hair done up in a bun, was next to perform. Her poem, "The Story of Genesis," explained the Biblical concept of original sin, changing the details of the story to reflect her imagination of Chinese culture by referencing a garden with a tall pagoda and a dragon who tempts Eve with a mandarin orange. The next Chinese poet recites another poem that was incomprehensible to the American audience due to the spotty internet connection and the language barrier. Carla and Angelica interrupt the Chinese poet to address the technological concerns, and they (and eventually Daryll) discussed what to do with Mandy. However, the poor internet connection made even that conversation impossible. Meanwhile, the American poets worked together in their clusters throughout the room to find their own solution. They proposed different alternative interfaces besides Skype, and they pulled out their phones and laptops to learn whether those alternatives, like WhatsApp and Zoom, were compatible with China's censorship laws and the hardware in Swenson Theater. When no solution comes to fruition, Darryl decided to give up on the technology and to continue the event without the Chinese attendants. Angelica and Carla signaled the next poet, Faduma, who approached the stage wearing a brightly colored, traditional

jilbab as the photographer snapped pictures. Faduma's poem, inspired by her

experienced growing up in Somalia and coming to the United States as a refugee, dealt

with the importance of education and democracy. Walter, a senior who has been heavily

involved in Radical Truth since his first year on campus, took the stage next to perform

a piece about the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and called for cross-racial unity

and understanding.

With the technological component of the evening scrapped, the event continued

to unravel in terms of structure: the photographers and all the administrators except for

Daryll had left; Carla appeared disheveled; and Angelica abandoned her role as MC to

fumble about in search of her misplaced cell phone. A handful of attendees trickled out,

but most of the long-time Radical Truth participants remained. The MCs tossed the

formal queue of performers, and Carla too surrendered their role as well to snuggle with

their girlfriend, Kay, in one of the far back rows. Counterintuitively, despite this

freewheeling turn, the energy in the room began to rekindle. Rather than reciting

polished poems that were glib, predictable, and perhaps a bit cliché, the remaining

poets performed edgier work. One poet, Estephan, performed a political piece on stage

that called the audience to stand up from their seats and pledge to fight for justice,

replicating a practice he attributed to Che Guevara. Kay, after some encouragement

from Carla, moved toward the front of the auditorium and performed a work-in-progress

piece called "Trigger Happy" about her past sexual abuse and current sex addiction.

Walter, the young man who performed the piece about Dr. King, moved closer to Kay

and recited a poem titled "Sandra Was Mom" about the ways in which he was

emotionally affected by Sandra Bland's so-called suicide in a Texas jail cell. Other

audience members moved closer to listen, forming a unified asymmetrical arc in the first three rows in front of the stage.

While Hiya China might not have gone as Daryll had planned, the event stands as a good example of how layers of institutional power shape identity and literacy practices as the contexts structuring our lives change. While Radical Truth's curriculum is not assessed per the request of any governmental accreditation body, Hiya China made it clear that the program, which does receive funding from the university, is assessed in other ways, and at the opening night reception, Daryll emphasized that part of the program involves performing for administrative audiences. He said, "Always be prepared around Daryll. The Chancellor might come in, and I be like, 'Aaliyah, come over here and spit a poem.'" Since poets were well prepared for events like these, they chose pieces that would appeal to their administrative audiences, pertaining to non-controversial and only mildly political topics. When the internet and Skype connection faltered, the power dynamics in the space shifted, as the students in the audience perceived, perhaps correctly, that they possessed a higher level of technological expertise than those running the event, and the trust that had developed between Daryll and the poets gave them the confidence to intervene directly in a way that seemed fluid and natural. Then, after the administrators left the auditorium, the poets' practices shifted again from performing polished, mild pieces to workshopping and experimenting with raw, vulnerable pieces, again emphasizing the deep trust and kinship at the heart of this community.

The cultural dissonance between the Chinese and US American poets extends beyond language the barrier alone. The Chinese poets, who had undergone very

different institutional conditioning and were living under different forms of institutional control, exhibited a stark difference in dispositions compared to their US American counterparts regarding their attitudes toward authority. This difference in disposition relates to how difficult international collaborations can be when different groups in different parts of the world are participating for different reasons and have different ideas about what a key component of the collaboration (in this case an open mic) really mean. The two groups of poets exhibited sharply different understandings of poetic forms and expectations as well. While most open mics are oriented toward the goal of sharing ideas or releasing deeply held emotion, given that the US American audience didn't understand Chinese and the Chinese audience didn't appear to understand much English, without a translator present, neither catharsis nor knowledge sharing were objectives for this event.

Rather, given the institutional pomp surrounding the event, the high-level administrators in attendance, Daryll's persistent communication about the importance of the event, the photographers' excitement whenever an exotic-looking poet walked on stage, and the administrators and photographers' quick exit once the virtual component of the event was nixed (perhaps to spare Daryll the embarrassment of a flopped event), Hiya China was less an open mic and more of an elaborate photoshoot to exemplify Seneca University's alignment with the forces of globalization, manifesting as an empty performance of diversity and equity without doing the (very difficult) work of building a truly inclusive environment. Chinese teenagers in pressed uniforms moving together in unison, happy hijabis, and polite, soft-spoken Black men were all positioned to build a narrative that Seneca University students are doing meaningful work in global contexts,

and yet, the only US American who made an effort to engage or appeal to the Chinese poets at all, Rose, did so with the intent of sharing her religious beliefs. To build inclusive spaces, organizers need to understand the unique dynamics that both animate and silence the various contingences and demographics they're hoping to engage and respond to those dynamics structurally, so the framing of an event, the marketing of an event, the tools and technologies used to facilitate an event, and the activities enacted within the event facilitate cross-community and cross-cultural understanding in a way that builds trust and encourages honest dialog within the scope of whatever institutional and physical limitations might be present.

Given the extent to which the event was geared around unspoken administrative goals, there was little the MCs could do to engage the Chinese poets in a way that'd be truly collaborative, and as such, there was neither the incentive nor the security for students to share work that's meaningful to them and their peers. Given the structure of the event, how it was discussed, and the guests in attendance, it was clear that the purpose of the event was to showcase Radical Truth's work to the school administration. While there's nothing wrong with that in and of itself, that goal was known to the participants, and they responded in kind with poems about sunsets, civil rights struggles from a half century earlier, and school itself.

However, Hiya China also illustrates how genres change and take shape from one context to the next. Open mics are supposed to be free-form events where poets can experiment and test semi-polished new work. Unlike a slam, open mics are noncompetitive, generally lack grand theatrics (no DJ, loud music, or elaborate lighting), and held in smaller venues for a more intimate audience, usually other poets and

friends. It's a space that's more formal than a workshop but more freewheeling than a slam or a competition. However, due to the level of surveillance at Hiya China and the added component of the virtual technology, the first half of the event deviated far from the generic expectations one would normally have of an open mic: performers were less vulnerable; they presented polished yet highly accessible work; they exhibited a sense of obligation rather than creative passion; and nobody knew quite how to behave. In contrast, after video technology was scrapped and the administrators left, the event's form changes again. What emerged in the second half of the night was also a deviation from the open mic genre as well but contrasted quite sharply from the first half of the night: the content of the work was especially raw; there was no organizing structure; and performers stood in the middle of an uneven half circle rather than in front of a microphone on a stage. This shift indicates how genres and the social actions they incite are mediated by technology and institutional power structures. Once the technology or the institutional power dynamics change, as does generic form. There's no way an open mic, like the kind you'd attend at a coffee shop in any large college town, could emerge in a space populated by high-ranking university officials and centered around a live video feed from the other side of the world. This shift is indicative of the idea of living poetry, that poetry is a tool that could shift from space to space, blending discourses, jumping scales, and potentially facilitating inter-personal and cross-cultural communication that transcends social divides.

And yet too, the event showcases the effects of institutional influence on a higher economic scale. In our current neoliberal world order, globalization and technology are prized on the job market and are thus heavily emphasized across Seneca University's

curricula and programming (much like every other university). Hence, Daryll's efforts to cajole the poets into performing at the event on the basis that it could go on their resumes. This orientation toward employable skills could also explain the degree of cultural insensitivity the US American MCs and poets showed toward their Chinese counterparts. Carla and Angelica's words and actions, from turning their back on the Chinese audience to salute them, the inside jokes about New York City culture, and the irreverence of showing up intoxicated indicate that true cross-cultural understanding and engagement were not values informing any part of this activity.   There could be pedagogical reasons for the poor behavior at this event too. Highlighting the affordances and limitations of expressivism, the poets were ablet to compose polished poems to speak to institutional stakeholders and raw, powerful poems that build a sense of community among themselves, but they also demonstrated a lack of curiosity of people and cultures that are different and knowledge of poetic forms other than slam and spoken word poetry. I can't help but wonder how the event would have gone differently if different values had been emphasized during the weeks leading up the event.

Still, Hiya China also indicated the complexities surrounding inclusivity in this space. While Radical Truth workshops and events are spaces of healing, self-determination, and validation for longtime members of the community, it's clear that the structure of the event and the culture of the community functioned to marginalize Faduma, her fellow Muslim friends, and the Chinese poets in Shanghai. The Islamophobia directed to Faduma deserves specific attention. Her religion was mocked, she was laughed at, and the alcohol on Carla and Angelica's breath further

communicated that Muslims aren't welcome in the space, despite Daryll's outreach that brought Faduma and her friends to the event. While Carla and Angela are clearly both individually responsible for this gross act of intimidation, it does illuminate many nuanced ways in which the layering of institutional power pertains to how various constellations of group identities interact in specific contexts. On one level, we might see the interaction between Carla, Angelica, and Faduma as a tension between sexual and religious minority groups. Angelica and Carla are both lesbian or queer, and Faduma is from a country where homosexuality is punishable by death. While Radical Truth wasn't exactly the most queer-inclusive space on campus when Carla, Angelica, and I started attending workshops, the program's culture grew to be more accepting of sexual minorities over the following years. It's plausible that Carla and Angelica could have been reacting to a fear that making the space for Muslims could erase the gains queer participants have made in shaping a culture for themselves. However, the reality of the situation is still more complicated. While many Islamic traditions are very clearly homophobic, the same could be said of Christianity, and while Carla and Angelica deliberately made Fatuma and her friends feel unwelcome in this space, they treat Rose, a longtime Radical Truth participant who is equally brazen about her religion, with deference and respect. This double standard between how Faduma and Rose are treated in this space speaks to how Carla and Angelica have been socialized in the past. While Rose is the most outspoken Christian participant, she's certainly not the only one. Many poets, and even Daryll himself, often speak about Christianity in workshops. Many African-American participants understand their racial identities as inseparable from their religious identities due to their long-term involvement in the Black

church. And Carla and Angelica were both raised Catholic themselves. So while Carla and Angelica have learned how to engage Christians through institutionalization, they haven't had the same degree of socialization around Muslims. In fact, given that Carla and Angelica both grown up in post-9/11 New York City, a time and space where casual Islamophobia would often surface in daily social interactions, it's easy to imagine how such inappropriate behavior would seem commonplace to them.

I'm not writing about Hiya China! to highlight problematic flaws, but rather my intent is to show why multiculturalism and inclusion, while worthy ideals, are difficult to obtain in practice and how that difficulty relates to literacy. Reflecting Jones' ideas about power and inclusivity, we can see how the infrastructure and the institutional motives mediating the event were oriented aways from the stated goal of cross-cultural collaboration. Furthermore, given disciplinary practices within Radical Truth itself, on campus, and in society, we could see how students might feel permitted to behave in problematic ways. Taken as a whole, to make spaces more inclusive, or to at least understand what's possible regarding inclusivity, it's necessary to understand that full cultural context, with particular attention to how power is layered across scales. Because different cultures are rooted in different values and have different goals and underlying social narratives, people respond to their surroundings and the happenings differently. Their cultural foundations, and the identities that arise from them, pertain to different dispositions and different ways they are affected viscerally by the events occurring around them. Hiya China! made this cultural complexity salient, given the differences between the Chinese, American, and Somali poets. Differences in the cultural foundations between poets made it difficult for the event to be effective because

each contingency was only aware of some of the goals and motives of the others. For instance, the American poets, initially choosing poems about topics like justice and education rather than trauma and sex, seemed to appeal more to the administrators present rather than the other participants. I don't necessarily fault the poets or even Daryll for this. The layering of institutional power is felt in any social context, affecting how we identify possibilities depending on how we're positioned within the systems structuring that context. In this context, because the opinions of the university's administration have material consequences for Radical Truth's future, it makes sense why that audience would be centered at such an event. Still, there are steps that could have been taken beforehand to better prepare Radical Truth participants for the event. For instance, having a workshop or two on traditional and modern forms of Chinese poetry; facilitating written correspondence between poets from both countries before the event; and having translators present on both sides of the screen would have allowed all those involved to better understand the interests, concerns, and desires of everyone else.

These kinds of shortcomings and mistakes, while regrettable, speak to the importance of having quasi-intuitional spaces to better understand the complexities of our contemporary world. If institutions instill principles that allow people to respond in community to respond to the dynamics impacting daily life, institutions need spaces to identify what those dynamics are what principles would lead to the best practices to respond to them. By identifying what went wrong, we're able to better theorize and develop practices to better support cross cultural engagement in the future.

The Slam

With a digital tablet in one hand and a microphone in the other, Nicole, a

confident, twenty-year-old Black woman, addresses a crowd of students, university

staff, and friends of the community who have packed The Down Low for the biannual

Mic Drop Poetry Slam, which Radical Truth hosts near the end of both semesters. "We

got a motto here at Radical Truth," Nicole shouts, "and that motto is one mic, one voice.

So all night, whenever y'all hear me say 'one mic,' I want y'all to shout back, 'one

voice!'" She calls out, "One mic!" And the crowd responds, "One Voice!" The chant goes

back and forth for about a minute, and a visceral connection forms between the people

in the room as a new collective consciousness emerges. Dressed in all black, save for a

large electric-purple necklace, Nicole commands the crowd as she darts across the

stage in six-inch heels, a leather skirt, and a lace top. She throws playful jabs at the

crowd for not shouting and clapping loud enough. Feeling the energy in the room, the

DJ, in sync with Nicole, plays "Juicy" by the Notorious B.I.G., a hip-hop classic from the

early '90s. Without missing a beat, Nicole pumps her fist in the air, and the crowd

chants along. Seemingly everyone in the audience knew all the words. Folks are

dancing in their seats, looking around, and making eye contact with one another as they

spout out lyrics. Nicole has her finger on the pulse of the room, and she works in

tandem with the DJ to weave a narrative connecting the poems and performances with

the attitude of the crowd. The energy is the room is buzzing. The floor shakes as

audience members clap, stomp, and shout.

A first-year student named Elizabeth approaches the mic. It's her first time

performing outside the safety of the workshops. She's visibly nervous, and the DJ spins

"I'm Coming Out" by Diana Ross to build her confidence and to excite the crowd for this emerging new voice. Elizabeth delivers her poem detailing the frustrations of dating, her ambivalence toward wanting to be sexually active, her trust issues, and the loneliness she feels about away from the reservation where she grew up. She pretty much knows the piece by heart and doesn't read from paper. Still, she fumbles now and then and gets tongue tied; audience members shout out words of support: "We love you, Lizzy!" "You got this, girl!" She regains her sense of rhythm and finishes the poem with force. The audience snaps in approval. As she exits the stage, the DJ plays "What's Luv?" by Fat Joe and Ashanti to complement the themes in Elizabeth's poem. Nicole makes a joke at the expense of one of her own exes, and the judges rate Elizabeth's performance out of 10. Nicole announces the scores to the crowd, "We have an 8.4!" Some audience members holler and snap to show their support. "An 8.2," she continues, "an 8.7, a 7.3—" the audience hisses and boos to express their disaccord with the low score, "—and a 9.1!" After hearing the nine, the crowd erupts with applause, and Elizabeth lowers her head and looks away out of modesty.

The scoring of poems represents the biggest difference between poetry slams and open mics. Poetry slams are different from open mics for a few reasons. Most importantly, slams are competitive whereas open mics are not. Daryll instructs the judges to score based on originality, performativity, and flow, and to rarely score anything below a 7 to not hurt a students' confidence. There are five judges, and Daryll records the scores and drops the highest and lowest scores, which he'll add back in to break a tie. In my five years working with Radical Truth, I judged all but one poetry slam. Elizabeth's performance evoked a particularly wide range of scores from the judges.

Some scored the poem relatively poorly since she momentarily forgot a couple of her lines, which broke flow while other judges scored the poem highly since it was her first time on stage and the poem was written from the heart, reflecting sincerity and vulnerability. Furthermore, the audience responds to the judges, expressing approval or disproval of the scores, which adds to the dramatic elements of the slam and serves as an additional form of validation for poets. While the audience holds the judges accountable, the judges still have the last word. This interaction between the audience and the judges, while mostly in jest, indicates differences in values between the judges and the crowd. While the judges value pieces that reflect a writer's unique lived experiences in a way that's confident, direct, and rhythmic, exhibiting a strong sense of authority, the audience values pieces that show emotional vulnerability with a preference for poets they know personally and an aversion to any low score at all. The slam is divided into two rounds, and the top scoring participants from the first round are invited back for the second. From adding the first and second round scores together, a first, second, and third prize winner are announced, and trophies are given out at the end of the night.

Most of the poems dealt with themes relating to sex, relationships, and social justice. Related to the prior, Shania, a senior, performed a piece about sexual liberation titled "A is for Amen." Shania sashayed onto the stage with a level of confidence rivaling Nicole, the MC. She took the mic and launched into her piece, declaring, "I own my thrown/I expose my rose/Open and free/Like the queen that I am." As she moves through the poem, she weaves together memories about the shame imposed on her by her church, family, ex-lovers, and the entertainment industry and how embracing her

sexuality is a form of self-care. In workshops, Shania would often talk about how society hypersexualizes Black female bodies yet stigmatizes them for the same sexualization, a social dynamic that she traces back to slavery. By taking ownership of her sexuality, Shania attempts to gain a sense of control of her sexual, racial, and gender identity, and thus the narrative of her life, in spite of cultural undercurrents that aim to define her. She ends the piece by using her sexuality as a means of redefining her faith, "Each flick of the tongue carries me higher, closer to ecstasy/This 'A' burnt onto my heart doesn't mean Adultery/'A' is for Amen/Hallelujah, hallelujah, praise be to God!" The poem resonates strongly with the crowd. Everyone goes wild, and women from all across the audience yell out words of support, hoot, and snap their fingers to show their approval.

"This is Radical Truth love. You gonna feel it all year long," Nicole says in response to the praise. "We have poetic license. It's who you are. Speak in your native tongue. Do you. When you're in class and a professor say you can't be on TV if you speak that way, drop a poem—fuck you." Nicole's commentary on how Radical Truth exists in relation to other spaces on campus serves to promote the program to prospective participants in the audience, and it speaks to the main reasons why quasi-institutional spaces are important for identity formation, particularly for students from nontraditional, vulnerable, oppressed, or stigmatized communities. In contrast to the classroom, where figures of authority may discredit students' knowledge and lived experience in favor genres and styles that reflect professionalism, defined by the practices of specific fields and occupations, Radical Truth provides a space, a community, and an audience where students can make sense of their past experiences in relation to all the new ideas they're encountering in college and in a way that

resonates with people they care about in the present. Nicole's commentary grounds notions of authenticity and identity in students' home communities and past experience, rather than the professional spaces where students aim to find belonging through their studies, and in doing so, she positions Radical Truth as a space where students can develop the identities they carry from home based on the ideas they're learning in school, while at the same time, critiquing the difficult and problematic aspects of education and exploring the tensions that emerge when the beliefs, values, and principles expressed in the classroom run counter to those that structure students' home communities. Nicole's use of an expletive highlights how such tensions can evoke feelings of anger and why spaces like Radical Truth are so important for students to articulate that anger in a way that builds community and connection with others.

At this point, Nicole turns to the judges and asks for the scores: a 9.7, a 9.8, a 9.5, another 9.7, and a perfect 10. The crowd erupts once more, and Nicole moves forward with the evening's program. "Coming to the stage now is my man from India," she says. "Let's give it up for Deepak!" As the crowd cheers Deepak to the stage, he seems visibly nervous, walking with his head down. He stands behind the microphone and pulls out his phone, on which he read a poem titled "Eternity":

> I could spend eternity exploring
> the space between your breasts.
> I struggle to utter words of love,
> but they stay lodged between my teeth
> poking out like toothpicks.
>
> I tame the hurricane in my soul
> with ink and paper
> as dust forms a halo
> around my laptop screen,
> flickering like fireflies floating chaoticly
> blinking in code and spelling

the stories of our lives.

I could spend eternity exploring
the space between your thighs,
surrendering to the warmth of you tides.
But what is that? I hear a ping.
I'm brought back down to the world.
There's a new message on my phone.

After Deepak finishes reciting his piece, the crowd snaps in approval, but without the hooting and stomping that followed Shania. Nicole asks the judges for their scores: a 7.6, an 8.5, a 7.9, an 8.1, and an 8.0. The reason why this poem wasn't received as well as Shania's was due to Deepak's lack of confidence. While Shania was animated and used body language and eye contact to engage the audience, Deepak just stood in front of the microphone slouched. While Shania memorized her piece by heart and carefully varied her rhythm and tone depending on the emotions she was communicating, Deepak read the piece without varying his style of delivery. As a judge, I rarely give a score higher than an 8 to a poet who reads their entire piece word-for-word off a page (or a phone) without so much as looking at the audience, again reflecting the cultural values in the space to privilege those perform their pieces with a high level of confidence and authority. There are cultural reasons why Deepak's experience, as an international student from India, could make it harder for him to perform his piece to the same degree of power as other poets like Shania. And while Radical Truth's workshop structure is designed to help students overcome social anxiety, if the space isn't accommodating to international Asian students, whether due to the slang and urban dialects used, the topics discussed, or participants own problematic biases, it would be hard for international students to fully utilize that

support. Even Nicole, the MC, referring to Deepak as "my man from India," positioned him as a cultural outsider. Nonetheless, if we're valuing stage presence, confidence, composure, and audience engagement, Shania's performance was stronger than Deepak's, even as Shania probably had more social support to polish and develop her poem to a greater degree. However, I couldn't help but notice the similarities between Deepak's performance and Elizabeth's. Both poems emphasized the awkwardness of dating and sex in late adolescence and early adulthood. Both poets were visibly nervous and insecure, and neither had their piece fully memorized. While the judges only scored Elizabeth slightly higher than Deepak (Elizabeth's average score was an 8.3 while Deepak's was an 8.0), the crowd was far more receptive and supportive to Elizabeth, an Indigenous American student. Upon finishing her piece, the audience embraced Elizabeth with warm, enthusiastic applause and they booed her lower scores. In contrast, the response was lukewarm for Deepak, who is very clearly not American.

After the judges read Deepak's scores, Nicole tries to infuse some energy into the room by calling out, "What's up, Brooklyn?!" to the audience. As expected, the Brooklynites yell, clap, and cheer in response. "Do we have Manhattan in the house?" The response isn't as intense as it was for Brooklyn, but it was still quite loud and energetic. "How about the boogie-woogie Bronx?" The response is rather limp. "C'mon, y'all, I know you can do better than that," Nicole says. The second showing from the Bronx is better, and Nicole seems pleased though not impressed. Next, she calls out Queens and Staten Island, though the audience was comically silent for the latter, and Nicole just shrugs. She then sets her attention away from New York City to see who's out there representing Jersey, Philly, Chicago, DC, Atlanta, and the West Coast. Apart

from adding some excitement, the activity centered New York City, at the expense of those from areas outside of large culturally diverse cities and US in general, signaling who is and isn't accepted in this space. (Note how India is mysteriously missing from the litany of locales.) Activities like this make it easier for poets from New York and the surrounding area to build connections, share experiences, and make new friends; it makes it harder for those outside those areas to do the same.

Nicole calls to the stage the next poet, Diamond, who performed a piece about structural racism and politics. Diamond begins standing in front of the mic, with her head down, dressed modestly, comfortably, and all in black. She stays like that, silent, for about ten second, just long enough to be uncomfortable, before springing to life with the opening lines of her poem:

> I'm mad blind.
> Curriculum, what and why we teach?
> No teachers for the class.
> We had a sub all year long.
> Not unruly—seeing their faces.
> Laughter not strong enough.
> The storm is coming—listen to the thunder.

Diamond continues with the poem, describing the conditions in a neglected inner-city public high school, which sounds similar to a prison, referring to "toilets over flowing with crap" and "broken pipes" in the physical space of the school before using "crap" metaphorically to describe her teachers who "teach to the test" and "broken pipe" as a metaphor to describe the school-to-prison pipeline before finishing the poem with a critique of whiteness and capitalism before circling back to issues involving incarceration:

> Dealin' with a lyin' white world.
> Pit the old against the young.

> Four-figure coat.
> More inmates now than there were slaves back then.
> We're more enslaved now than we've ever been.

Upon delivering the last two lines, Diamond throws her hands in the air in resignation, drops her head again, and exits the stage just as somberly as she came. Nicole, feeling the gravity of the piece, replies simply saying, "truth," before asking for the judges for their scores: a 9.3, a 9.8, an 8.2, an 8.8, and a 9.0. I found Diamond's poem to be impactful because of her fragmented style, which I found to be the source of her power as a

poet. It was clear that she couldn't completely determine how the pieces of her life fit together, how her education then relates to her education now, but a deep-felt sense honed closer to whatever that connection is, that which she cannot yet speak.

The slam represents many of the ways the principles that ground Radical Truth's pedagogy are enacted by the program's participants. The idea that "the process becomes part of you" reminds us that social processes create identities. As Darryl said at the opening night reception back in September, the purpose of the program is to "[promote] confidence in writing and performance." Given that most of students come from backgrounds that have been traditionally underrepresented in institutions of higher education and in professional industries more generally, and as such, may not initially feel comfortable in such spaces, Radical Truth serves an important function on campus for providing students a setting where they could build confidence, which would enable them to take more effective control of their studies, and in turn, their lives. It's key that Darryl mentions both writing *and* performance. While writing is a technology that enables us to determine our lives, what becomes ready-at-hand for us on the page is

often shaped by the social contexts of our lives. By creating a space where student can *perform* an emerging identity—to formulate narratives explaining how they arrived at a particular moment in life, that allows them to communicate their motives, desires, hopes, and fears, they'd be better able to form a stance in their writing and course work that's more aligned with those personal motivators and histories. Furthermore, from the process of being judged and scored on their poetry and performance, the poets gain a sense of validation through formal approval. Of course, this validation comes with a caveat: it's only validating if one performs well. In the context of Radical Truth's slams, that is part of the reason why judges are instructed not to give any score below a 7/10, so hopefully no poet will return home feeling dejected. However, even if one does score well, a solid score is only a reflection of the values of the judges and the program itself. There are many respectable forms of poetry that wouldn't score well at a slam, which doesn't mean that those forms and the culture that gave rise to them, aren't valuable. So, while participating in the slam can affirm one's sense of self or help one reconstitute a sense of self, the identity one creates in that space only functions in relation to the cultural values mediating the processes through which that identity is constructed.

In relation to questions of inclusivity, the slam is a powerful space to reclaim one's sense of self, but not all people have equal access to the space. Students who are involved in communities that share similar cultural values as Radical Truth will have an easier time utilizing the space to its full potential; those from other backgrounds, like Muslims or international students from Asia, might have a harder time finding belonging in the space. However, reshaping the space to be more inclusive would require a structural understanding of how it's situated in relation to the larger institution of Seneca

University and in relation to society at large, which present specific limits regarding what's possible. For instance, while eliminating references to New York City culture would help make the slam more inclusive to international students and even domestic students from the fly-over states, such a move would take away part of what makes the program culturally authentic in the first place and would likely make the program less of second home for students from New York City, lessening its efficacy for those who are thriving in the space.

Inclusivity and Cultural Change

While questions regarding power, access, and equity are important to consider when considering how inclusive a program is and how it should best be improved, those aren't the only factors that speak to the affordances and limitations of inclusive spaces. Oftentimes, questions about inclusivity relate to issues pertaining to how we're able collaborate with people who are different than us, which could sometimes be at odds with what we need to feel safe and supported. In the context of Radical Truth, many poets live in a state of fear and anxiety. For example, Carla is worried that internal conflicts in the LGBTQ community could spark backlash from heterosexuals, and for that reason, Carla is weary of engaging people who aren't queer. Carla claims that "in the LGBT community, gay men seek masculine gay men and have a problem with being too feminine; and then society, which is the heterosexual world, sees gay men as always having to be feminine, and if they're masculine, they quickly assume they must have some sexual feeling or romantic feeling of the opposite sex." While Carla's generalizations might be a little too broad, perhaps rooted in outdated assumptions,

their comments nonetheless contest social expectations regarding gender both within and outside of queer spaces to assert their own authority on matters related to gender. They imagine gay men as living in a catch-22 where being too feminine risks social marginalization and being too masculine risks a misunderstanding akin to going back in the closet. While Carla is critical of the prejudices some gay men have with regard to gender, they're thankful that their perceptions of this conflict has yet to garner mainstream scrutiny, speaking to their own deeply rooted anxieties. Carla says "I can't really say it's good, but in a way it's good because we're not letting the outside world see that. We're not letting, like, the heterosexual world see that. Because if they do see that they'll destroy us even more." Carla's comment attempts to align internal conversations within the queer spaces they're a part of to larger social discourses around gender and sexuality. Despite the tensions, disagreements, and prejudices between various factions within various queer communities, Carla makes the value judgement that it's best to keep such matters private. In doing so, they are aligning all queer people against a common enemy: the heterosexual world. While there are certainly lapses in Carla's reasoning, they position queerness, or any deviation from gendered norms, as being outside the realm of what's socially acceptable, making queer people vulnerable to violence, reflecting Carla's distrustful attitudes toward the world around them and their internal struggle with regard to how they identify themself in the world.

Carla cares enough about this issue of gender discrimination among gay men that they wrote a paper about the topic for their sociology class. When presenting her project, they learned that their peers were not aware of that particular problem, causing

Carla to feel guilty about sharing their perspective on the topic. They said, "A lot of people were like, wait what? That actually happens? In a way I feel kind of guilty because I just sparked this thing, and I don't want them to backlash us." Carla's anxieties speak to common experiences felt by minorities across society. While Carla's mechanical knowledge of writing meets college expectations, the fear they feel surrounding act of engaging audiences outside of their own queer community prevents them from working effectively with other audiences. There is an affective element to this, when faced with fear, it's difficult for people to find a path forward, but it also relates to rhetorical knowledge as well. Carla sees all heterosexuals as having the same bigoted beliefs as the most flamboyant conservatives on cable news or social media.

Carla's disposition regarding engagement and knowledge sharing with others is reflective of both the value and the challenges of Radical Truth. On one hand, the program offers domestic BIPOC and queer students a space where they can reconstruct their foundational narratives and craft new identities, allowing many to participate in their communities more fully. By the end of their years and Seneca University, Carla organized an open mic event to draw attention to sexual assault within queer relationships and published several essays and photographs in *Out Loud!*, Seneca's LGBTQ magazine. Other poets, like Noah and Angelica, also published in *Out Loud!* as well. Rose edited a publication called *Mosaic*, which features writing from local public-school students, and she frequently contributed to *Maverick,* a campus magazine focused on issues affecting Black students, which was started by a Radical Truth alum. Rose also translated the poem she performed at Hiya China, "The Story of Genesis," into Spanish and published it in *El Pueblito*, Seneca's Spanish-language student

magazine. But though the poets' community involvement is in many ways impressive and sophisticated, apart from Rose, they usually tend not to engage communities and demographics outside their own.

While I've seen Radical Truth profoundly change poets' lives, transforming them into more confident people, I can't help but wonder at times whether the program would be more or less effective and beneficial for domestic BIPOC and queer students if the space were more inclusive of students from other backgrounds, like Asian or Muslim. Would making a more inclusive Radical Truth take away from what the space so boldly Black? Would it take away from what makes the space powerful and special? On one hand, a more inclusive program could help poets learn to build connections and collaborate with people who don't look, live, and think like them. In a society that's becoming ever more polarized and fragmented, such skills are becoming increasingly necessary and valuable. On the other hand, a more diverse program could present challenges with regard to establishing the trust and understanding necessary for students to open up about the most vulnerable aspects of their lives.

However, over the five years I worked with Radical Truth, I did see significant progress in how the program included queer people, which could indicate how Radical Truth and other programs like it could be more inclusive without sacrificing their original purpose. Radical Truth was not exactly the most queer-inclusive space when I started attending workshops. While I never noticed any overt homophobia around students, I did encounter some problematic conversations with Office of Multicultural Matters administrators and staff during my first two years observing the program. One voiced their frustration, saying that the LGBTQ movement was a distraction impeding the fight

for racial justice. Another, alluding to the Book of John, compared gay people to "vines that bear no fruit." And yet again, another staff member privately confided in me that he's gay but did not feel safe enough to come out.

The program's culture did change, which I credit to a large extent to Carla. When Carla started attending workshops, they were preparing to drop out of school because they felt that they didn't belong. After attending their first workshop, they were impressed because the other poets sincerely wanted to get to know them. Given that most of the poets at the time were Black, Carla initially wrote poems about their ethnic identity as a Dominican American and the conflicted emotions they felt presenting as Black but sharing few cultural similarities with their African-American peers. Despite those differences, cultural diversity across the African diaspora proved to be a topic that resonated with many of the Black poets, which led to robust discussions and helped Carla feel included within the group. Over time, however, issues related to gender and sexuality became more pressing in Carla's life than their racial and ethnic identities. Throughout their time in the program, Carla identified as a lesbian woman, a transgender man, a transmasculine person, gender fluid, agender, nonbinary, and queer[4]. None of those terms seemed to fit Carla's self-perception, and through their poetry, they weaved together various moments alluding to a range of spaces to explain why they cannot be contained by whatever gender category they were experimenting with at the time, all the while developing a more nuanced understanding of gender and educating their peers on the material challenges affecting their life.

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[4] The term 'queer' here is generally synonymous with 'gender nonconforming.' Elsewhere in the study, 'queer' is used an umbrella term for all sexual and gender minorities, generally synonymous with 'LGBT.'

In many ways, Carla's poems reflect the core principles of the program: living poetry, the process becomes part of you, and radical truth. Regarding living poetry, Carla used writing as a means of making sense of their world and the changing dynamics of their life, allowing them to grow and evolve. With regard to the process becomes part of you, through writing and performing poems, talking about gender, and organizing events, Carla created a reputation for themself as an expert on LGBTQ issues. And regarding radical truth, the poems were rooted in Carla's lived experience and had an emotional impact strong enough to disrupt the space and expand the cultural foundations of community, opening up space other queer, trans, and gay poets to come. Carla's poems sparked dialog among the other poets and challenged assumptions. Daryll himself started seeking out more progressive interpretations of the Bible, and I overheard the staff member who compared gay people to fruitless vines explain to another that God "actually" destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah to avenge xenophobia, not homosexuality. Then, after drama erupted at the LGBT Center on campus that prompted a student boycott, Carla promoted Radical Truth as an alternative queer space on campus, citing the support they received working through their questions about gender. Then after, both BIPOC students of all genders and sexualities and queer students of all races and ethnicities both maintained modest majorities at workshops and events.

While Carla fears backlash from the outside world, which keeps them from engaging people who are different, what they don't know is that they already have the skills to change hearts and minds because that's exactly what they've have been doing in the program. It's what the program has been designed to teach them how to do. Still,

Carla's fears speak to some of the challenges that all writing teachers face with regard to transfer. Though they have demonstrated mastery with a programmatic outcome in the context of the program itself, that skill is not readily available for them in some contexts outside of the program—specifically in spaces that are defined by demographic groups that they distrust. Perhaps this issue could be addressed by incorporating a more explicit focus on peacemaking, coalition building, and transcending social barriers. Perhaps the program could make more of an effort to engage more diverse audiences; perhaps the program could change to support a more diverse mix of participants.

Regarding that last point, I can't say whether making Radical Truth more inclusive would ultimately be a benefit or not for the Black students who are served so well by the program as it is. The needs of Black students are obviously quite diverse, and my own understanding of those issues is rather limited due to my own subjectivity. However, any structural changes to the program would affect its efficacy for Black students and those of other demographic backgrounds. Culture emerges from structure, which is something that everyone working in community writing spaces should bear in mind. Recruitment practices, assessment practices, meeting spaces, event sequencing, collaborative partnerships, and institutional surveillance all affect what's possible in a given space and how individual participants engage with a program. What participants need in a given context will depend on the local context, and administrators, facilitators, and program coordinators need to develop practices to understand how the structures of their programs relate to the needs of the their participants, the ways institutional mediation either supports or limits a program's outcomes, and how to adapt a program accordingly, knowing that some programs should be more transparent while others

should offer greater degrees of privacy; some programs should be more inclusive while others should center around common affinities.

However, if greater inclusivity is a goal for any program, community, or organization, there are rewards and challenges. Carla's fear of heterosexual backlash points to both. While we need to learn how to live, work, and collaborate with people who see the world differently than we do, such engagement isn't easy and could prevent a group from establishing mutual trust and obscure a group's original sense of purpose. However, Radical Truth shows us that inclusive change is possible without challenging a program's integrity. Carla was able to expand the cultural foundation of the group by establishing themself through sharing experiences related to their Afro-Latinx identity, squarely in relation to Radical Truth's core purpose. By sharing their own radical truth related to gender, they were able to successfully expand the group's purpose and contingency. This rhetorical two-step of affirming a community's core beliefs while disrupting other beliefs and assumptions is a practice that can be applied across contexts.

Outside of Radical Truth, this study illuminates three key suggestions regarding how to construct more inclusive programs and organizations that can be applied across contexts:

1) Expanding on Jones' ideas about inclusivity and power, sociolinguistic scalar analysis is an important tool for identifying how infrastructure, ideology, disciplinary practices, and interpersonal interactions influence one another with regard to shaping an inclusive culture. Society is organized horizontally and vertically in relation to multiple layers of institutional influence and

multiple centers of authority. By studying the scalar moves that people make in a given context, we're able to identify specifically what structural changes are needed to create a culture that erases problematic divisions while maintaining the structural elements of a space that are valuable and beneficial.

2) Institutional proximity affects what's socially possible in a given space. These limits relate to pedagogy, programmatic outcomes, and inclusivity alike. Due to institutional proximity and influences, some spaces will necessarily reify certain values that are at odds with certain communities. In such spaces, we won't be able to make spaces more inclusive without reforming or eliminating the institutions that mediate them, a considerably difficult task.

3) The concept of the radical truth can lead to institutional change to make spaces more inclusive by influencing the core beliefs (doxa), which in turn affects ideology, disciplinary practices, and interpersonal interactions. My recommendation is for administrators, facilitators, and teachers to build infrastructure that allows for the radical truth to emerge, so they might better learn what's impacting the lives of the communities they serve and those they're trying to reach. Doing so will allow for the rethinking of programmatic structures and outcomes, pedagogical methods, and assessment practices to instill the principles needed for a more diverse coalition of participants to develop the literacy practices needed to navigate life more effectively.

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