

6-2022

Journeying Toward Liberation: Creating Civic Utopias through Restorative Literacies

Rae L. Oviatt

Eastern Michigan University, roviatt@emich.edu

Megan McElwee

Holt Public Schools, megan.mcelwee@hpsk12.net

Owen Farney

Central Michigan University, farne1oj@cmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>



Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oviatt, Rae L.; McElwee, Megan; and Farney, Owen (2022) "Journeying Toward Liberation: Creating Civic Utopias through Restorative Literacies," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 37: Iss. 2, Article 7. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2330>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Journeying Toward Liberation: Creating Civic Utopias through Restorative Literacies

RAE L. OVIATT, PH. D., MEGAN MCELWEE AND OWEN J. FARNEY

“[W]e must always be future bound in our desires and designs...we need to know that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality”

~Jose Estaban Muñoz (2009)

Across the long and contiguous history of the United States, literacy has inherently been connected to civic engagement. For example, Michigan legislators have called into question the right to literacy over the last several years, speaking out in defense of emergency management of underfunded schools that highlighted the decades-long lack of financial support for schools serving primarily Black students across Detroit. The landmark federal court ruled that literacy is, in fact, a constitutional right. Judge Eric Clay (2020) ruled that when “a group of children is relegated to a school system that does not provide even a plausible chance to attain literacy, we hold that the Constitution provides them with a remedy” (as cited in Turner, 2020, n.p.). Clay’s ruling held that without literacy the opportunities for an engaged citizenry would not meet the needs of effectively answering a jury summons or the ability to vote. The important lessons that can be learned from our nation’s textured histories are now being called into question as vital to today’s youth.

In an era where educators’ teaching practices are being challenged across states, legislators are attacking the right to include some of our nation’s most marginalized voices, their histories, and literacies. Our narrative article seeks to name the need and highlight the possibilities for supporting teachers and their students in deeper understandings

that continue to center the importance of literacy for civic identity. We expansively define literacies to include reading, writing, listening, and viewing, but also to encompass doing so across modes, languages, cultures, and contexts. Our purpose in writing this article and sharing our individual narratives is to highlight the importance of humanizing the practices that hold potential for moving past our current era in envisioning the possibility for civic utopias. In doing so, we begin by situating the current moment that would erase our country’s textured histories due to policy roll-outs that seek to silence any mention of this nation’s struggles (and joys) for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian people. Furthermore, states who have been rapid in their adoption of what many are referring to as anti critical race theory policies continue to gain traction in movements of erasure by further silencing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) people, our histories, and our rights through continued policy proposals and adoptions.

Moving from situating our current moment to turning toward what we would desire (Tuck, 2008) as a healing and ameliorative response to move closer to civic utopias, we layer our argument with a brief examination of the possibilities for all youth when classroom teachers center restorative literacies and queer futurity. Our three individual stories follow to highlight what we found to be missing across our experiences as youth and what our experiences look like now as queer educators. Our narratives, written in our individual voices, provide a polyvocal turn from the scholarly intent of the beginning of this article, and in doing so we highlight both what we have learned and where we have yet to grow. Finally, we provide brave and bold suggestions for engaging

pedagogies of coalitional liberation as praxis toward centering civic utopias in literacy classrooms by starting with the self.

We contend that calling for civic utopias during an era of educational silencing is brave, but necessary. Currently, 39 states across the country have passed, are continuing to consider, or have submitted for consideration policies that would seek to silence any anti-racist teaching practices across disciplines. For example, the Michigan House of Representatives passed HB 5097 in fall of 2021, which prohibits academic standards from promoting any type of “race or gender stereotyping.” A closer look at the language of the policy suggests that the stereotyping mentioned is meant to disparage white and male subjects through the teaching of accurate historical portrayals of the textured history of this nation. Thus, the concern is not with eradicating centuries long stereotyping of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and youth, but the fear from white males that they may be treated in ways in which they have been treating others since the advent of colonialism and white supremacy, or at the very least the long and contiguous history of racism and cisheteropatriarchy. Similar language is seen across the country in such rapid succession that the policies have become hard to track, though PEN America’s (2022) working spreadsheet of “Educational Gag Orders” provides a working list of these policies and their strangely similar language. For example, the Florida House of Representatives recently passed the “Stop WOKE Act,” which seeks to not only silence educators, but also provides legislative grounds for dismissal of any employee who vocally stands in solidarity with the textured histories and literacies of the multiplicity of voices at the intersections of race and gender (Luneau, 2022). Florida’s legislators have not stopped there, as the “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” bill furthers this violent silencing to exclude any mention of LGBTQ+ people or issues in classrooms and schools across the state. Florida is only one of many states that have forwarded violent policies as a pathway toward further silencing teachers and students who identify and stand in solidarity with LGBTQ+ and Queer and Trans BIPOC (QTBIPOC) communities. When legislators consider certain

communities and lives as being of greater value to education and silence and erase whole communities, this is a form of violence. These violent policies then make room for further harm for students whose multiplicities of lived experiences already place them at the intersections of oppressive systems and do so with real consequences to the very safety of students’ lives.

Restorative Literacies & Queer Futurity

Restorative literacies, or educational practices of solidarity and liberation, have a long history of being attacked by organized conservative efforts to shape education. Pritchard (2017) argued for us to “move beyond this place where we are stuck... (through)...airing out grievances...and a commitment and recommitment to an ethics of intellectual community that requires epistemological empathy, accountability, humility, and intersectionality” (p. 247). We refer to Pritchard’s (2017) definition of restorative literacies as, “a form of cultural labor through which individuals tactically counter acts of literacy normativity through the application of literacies for self- and communal love” (p. 33). Normative literacies can be seen as favoring white cishetpatriarchal, or dominant, forms and models of literacy. Critical self-reflection and self-assessment are necessary first steps in examining how our teaching practices might be reproducing normative literacies. For example, we suggest reviewing our teaching of literacies for harmful English-only practices that do not honor students’ varied and multiple use of languages. This lack of emphasis on multiliteracies is only one factor for inclusion when examining our use of normative literacies, which also might take the forms of erasing multiple and pluralistic expressions and histories in our teaching and learning communities.

Turning toward restorative literacies, and away from normative literacies, demands returning to Pritchard’s (2017) framework and how it could apply to our own classroom spaces. Pritchard noted that restorative literacies is a performance of cultural labor through which students explore their “own meanings of literacy as they work to articulate what literacy means within shifting cultural, political, social,

and economic contexts” (p. 33), and a humanizing teaching practice would make space for students’ humanity. Our ability to do so, however, demands that we have done a great deal of critical self-work and self-assessment. In sharing our narratives, below, we move across our own stories of progressing from self-exploration and affirmation, self-advocacy, and toward communal advocacy.

Our experiences as students and teachers with collectively more than 30 years in classrooms has taught us valuable lessons toward efforts to stand in solidarity. Centering empathy, accountability, humility, and intersectionality goes further in engaging across the lived experiences and already present literacies of our QTBIPOC students and their communities, while also supporting our more privileged students to embrace humanizing actions outside of our classrooms. Our diverse journeys from silenced (and underrepresented) youth to empowered and empowering queer educators have not been perfect arcs through which we attempt to communicate the process of coming into foregrounding restorative literacies in our practices. Rather, we share the humanity and messiness of our journeys. Moreover, we acknowledge that the autonomy and power to share our stories in our current moment of violent policies sweeping the nation makes clear that we have not arrived in a present reality that provides further empowerment for queer youth.

Models of Culturally Responsive & Queer of Color Literacies

Models of teaching and learning have well established the power and potential for culturally responsive pedagogies that center the voices and histories of communities of Color (Muhammad, 2020). However, far less work has been enacted that provide models of centering race, genders, and sexualities justice as collective praxis in our literacies work. Notable exceptions can be seen from authors who’ve intentionally sought to bring together critical racial literacies and queer theory (Blackburn, 2005; Johnson, 2017; Pritchard, 2017). For example, Johnson examined the process of writing the self in an after-school writing club for three Black queer

youth, wherein queer youth of Color are more concerned with the process than the product.

These models of furthering restorative literacies are all under attack, and the dizzying examples of this conservative backlash affect whose literacies matter in classroom spaces, which has lasting implications toward our civic future as a nation. Furthermore, we acknowledge that even for teachers who have enacted culturally responsive pedagogy, the current political climate has brought us all under additional stress during an ongoing pandemic when stress is at an all-time high. Yet, we believe that there is no time like the present to reach for hopeful models of what is possible when we engage the brave work of restorative literacies.

Moving Toward Queer Futurity

We affirm that what we seek can best be described as queer futurity. In reaching for hope, we turn toward the work of Muñoz (2009) in finding hope for a future, and in particular a queer future, that is not yet here. Muñoz argued that we “must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent” (p. 30). He illuminated that queer futurity is a desire for “both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom” (p. 30). We extend the author’s argument for queer futurity into classroom spaces during an era where silencing and erasure of the global majority’s experiences, histories, and contributions are being reinforced by racist and heterosexist policies.

We envision queer futurity in our suggestions for classroom practice as not being a place that we will arrive any time soon, but rather an ideal to reach for that is grounded in the radical imagination. Muñoz (2009) noted that the “queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (p. 91). It is in Muñoz’s emphasis on endurance that we call teachers to stand with students and communities who are most in need of their collective love and efforts toward restorative literacies. We bring together Muñoz and Pritchard’s work in conversation toward the possibilities of classrooms as spaces of coalitional liberation. This

requires moving beyond critical self-work and self-assessment, to supporting our communities in doing better. Thus, reiterating the wisdom that none of us are free until we are all free.

Moving From Self to Communal Advocacy

Across our narratives as youth who did not feel a sense of belonging and representation to the educators we have become, we highlight moments of unlearning our own privilege as white (and white-presenting) as we seek to enact literacies teaching as an act of advocacy that center the literacies of our most underrepresented students and their communities. In the following three ELA teacher narratives, we share our experiences from a mid-career professional, to one pre-service, and a teacher educator. Collectively, we note the negotiations across our own educational trajectories as students and how these experiences have shaped our commitments as queer educators who are deeply committed to diverse voices being centered in our classroom spaces.

Megan's Story

I did not identify as queer in my youth. I do now. My experiences as a junior high student in the mid 90s were much different than those of the 8th-grade students I teach today. Public acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and my understanding of the community were nascent. My grasp of intersectionality has deepened as I grow into my identity as a queer woman.

When I think of queer futurity, I consider how to foreground listening deeply while unlearning harmful ideologies and ideas. That encompasses what I attempt for myself and what I challenge my students to do. I teach English, co-advise the Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA), and advise the Diversity Club at my school of 800 7th and 8th graders with 40% non-white representation in suburban mid-Michigan. More than 50 students have attended my school's GSA this year. My own experiences can't touch the breadth of my students', but I've developed empathy through teaching for 17 years and reading a lot of diverse literature. My journey is toward humility in truly hearing my students' experiences and needs regarding their identity so that we can act together toward a common future.

Over the past few years, especially during the move online during COVID (March 2020 to June 2021), the format of students' conversations and interactions has changed. Our group of GSA participants over the previous two school years have often focused on participating across online apps that have provided pathways toward LGBTQ+ youth's multimodal expressions of self. Embracing their self-expression has pushed me to learn new things, acquire new vocabulary, be vulnerable to these youth, and celebrate their contributions to all discussions!

In my English classroom, I have pride flags sprinkled around the room. I've had several robust conversations with students about whether this is a good or a bad thing. Am I just trying to "pander" to a trend? Do I back up my displays of flags with actual discussion and action? I hold myself accountable to be able to say "yes" to the latter. When students call something "gay" in a pejorative or ambiguous way, I challenge it. I teach the difference between sexuality and a stereotype of behavior. Is being "gay" actually what they mean? These conversations push me. I'm not comfortable with them. My heart beats more quickly as I foster them because I fear I'll say the wrong thing. Maybe my message will be muddled. But it's worth it, if a student feels supported by something that came up in the discussion. And they do: students have praised the "arguments that get the whole class talking and voicing their opinion" (anonymous student feedback, 2022).

As I witness students weighing their own gender and sexuality, I strive to support them in their discovery. What can a trans student do when the art they might take home could "out" them to their unsupportive family? How can students change their name in Google Classroom, so they're not constantly deadnamed, in a way that their parents don't get to judge? I am floored by the candor, authenticity, and bravery of these students. They have inspired me to be more transparent with my own identity. They are changing the future.

When I think of students who struggle academically, I think of students who have underlying conflict with their own identity. I worry about legislation that is punitive toward students who are unsuccessful in school or that limits discussion,

because there are so many reasons that contribute to one's success, or lack thereof. LGBTQ+ students pursue representative literature and online communication that supports their internal debate. They communicate effectively with others undergoing similar struggles. Their pursuit of self-exploration pushes them deeper into literacy. However, being literate in this way is not always acknowledged or supported by schools. I seek to be an educator who highlights LGBTQ+ issues, since "...attending a school that included positive representations of LGBT topics in the curriculum was related to a less hostile school climate" (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. 60) and a decrease in feeling unsafe.

Empathy is, perhaps, the most powerful tool we have as humans. Listening deeply facilitates empathy. Empathy allows us to dig deeper than test scores, when it comes to assessing students' competency with literacy. It asks us to examine a person's engagement with text in whatever realm it exists, even if it's not through the standardized tests. Finding the root of that engagement allows us all to consider our inner truths, adapt them to our current reality, and look toward our own futures. Through listening and self-reflection, each of us can support one another in our attempts to build queer futurity.

Owen's Story

I provide my insight as a queer student in the classroom and what it took for me to recognize my own power as a queer individual. As a middle and high school student, I was a closeted gay male. While this was due in part to the largely christian values of both my own home and the community I lived in at large, it also stemmed from a lack of queer representation in the media that I had available to me at the time. I wanted to be reading queer Young Adult Literature (YAL), but they either weren't available or weren't being recommended by the teachers I had. I wanted to be writing about my feelings and experiences as a queer student, but there simultaneously were no opportunities, nor comfortable spaces, to do so. I struggled to acknowledge and harness my own intrinsic power and expertise as a queer student because I had no foundation to latch onto and build from: no queer books, no queer teachers, no fellow queer students.

As a college student, I began the process of coming-out. Spurred not only by the new environment away from home, free of the judgement of parents and community alike, it was also due in large part to the recognition and validation that my college community gave to me as a queer student and individual. I spent my first year of college taking up every opportunity I could to engage in the queer community that was all around me. I attended queer-focused panels on campus, I took up queer book recommendations from professors in my literature classes, and I made connections with other queer students on campus through student-leadership events. Because the community I was in acknowledged and affirmed me as a queer individual, I was able to begin acknowledging and harnessing my own intrinsic power and turn it into expertise. I'll never forget going home that following summer and hearing my friends and family all say on different occasions, "you look so much happier than you used to."

With a community around me that not only accepted my queerness but also encouraged it, I found it easier and easier to recognize my potential in many ways. I "broke out of my shell," if you will, and came into my own as a queer student. I got involved on campus as the president of my residence hall, took up a job as a consultant at the campus writing center, started attending meetings for our campus National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) affiliate, and eventually ran for the president position. While none of these involvements were directly related to me being queer, they had everything to do with the validation and acceptance that I felt in my newfound community. No longer inhibited by a fear of the communities I was in, I was able to flourish in ways that I couldn't as a middle or high school student grappling with lack of representation and belonging that allowed me to express my full humanity as a gay man.

Within the roles that I took up on campus, I even started to bring my queerness in and harness it as part of my own potential; I began shaping it into an expertise. As a sophomore, I made my work at the Central Michigan University writing center queer-centric and thereby self-centric. I started compiling

research about queer theory in writing centers and what it looked like to create a welcoming space for queer students. As the president of our NCTE affiliate, I started bringing in queer books for book talks, eventually allocating a month of our weekly meetings to book talks and book clubs focusing on intersectional YAL. I was interested in what it meant for our group of mostly white, mostly straight pre-service teachers to reflect on our privilege of having books that represented our identities when we were in middle and high school. Eventually, this idea led to my senior year honors capstone project in which I researched queer and BIPOC intersectionality in YAL. Would I have ever found myself doing a project like that if I hadn't had a community that acknowledged and accepted my queerness? I believe that we are able to explore our potentials when we are in communities that acknowledge and accept our identities.

Rae's Story

At 16 years old, I organized my first community outreach event, a punk show on an early Sunday evening where the club that the event was held at was usually closed after any given raucous Saturday night. The event's ticket proceedings went to a nearby sanctuary space for LGBTQ+ youth who found themselves struggling with housing insecurity for a variety of reasons, but mostly due to the fact that their identities and beings were not welcome in the childhood homes that had once provided a certain level of safety and security. In my early experiences with youth-led demonstrating and organizing, I was modestly successful in centering empathy, building awareness, and raising funding, but I was not considered traditionally successful in my public school. In fact, I was what you might consider a failing student, especially if you were looking at my grades and my ability to be consistently present. There was far more to why I was excelling in certain communities and not in others that began to emerge when I, a nontraditional and first-generation college-going person, decided to return to school to become a teacher.

In the early 2000s, I simply wanted to be the teacher I had not had. I wanted to emphasize what youth valued, and not what my institution wanted

me to highlight. As I learned more, I began to see that there was a name for this, culturally responsive education. Yet, I also noted that this label seemed to only point to much needed calls for racial justice in the classroom. Though this was highly important to me due to having grown up in communities of Color, I needed something that reflected my own experiences and the intersectionality of the queer youth of Color with whom I surrounded myself. I sought out opportunities for furthering my education, after mentoring my own pre-service teachers in my classrooms left me with those same feelings of dissatisfaction that I had once experienced as a student. Why had they not been taught to engage youth in conversations that not only welcomed all of their identities, but done so in critical ways that welcomed students to lean in to their own racialized or gendered healing?

Eventually, this led to supporting pre-service English teachers in an English methods and practicum course across 2018-2019. Opportunities for critical mentorship of a smaller cohort of LGBTQ+ teachers in that class arose. As such, I invited them to co-construct a multimodal composing unit rooted in queer theory and multimodal composing. They, in turn, would teach me so much more. Over our time together, we worked to co-construct, co-teach, co-research a participatory unit on what we would come to call *Queer Composing*. Out of this crew of dynamic queer educators, only one was of Color. Though I mentioned that I grew up in communities of Color, I am what many would refer to as privileged by my passing into whiteness. Others in my family would not be allowed that same privilege. I had always seen the need for racial justice as foundational to all of the work we must do both in education and in the world. Yet somehow, I had reproduced the very normalizing of whiteness that I have always worked so hard to push against across my broader work. Our group of co-conspirators brought together our shared knowledge of queer literature, art, and culture and drew on shared knowledge of literature and literacies that barely added queer voices of Color. The sad reality was that I hadn't even noticed that I had shepherded us into the land of queer whiteness, and I would argue away from queer futurity, until I began to code our

data for presentation and publication. My coming to an awareness of what I had missed was humbling. This awareness did not miss me, but how to hold myself accountable for doing better took longer.

Over the last few years, I have worked to bring together my understandings of critical race literacies and queer literacies, or *Queer of Color* literacies, in an effort to both align my solidarity work with my communities and become a better bridge-builder for teachers. For example, I am currently working with a small group of dedicated educators across the state in a book club that deepens our understanding of race, genders, and sexualities justice through our state affiliate of NCTE. Moreover, I have organized professional learning for teachers co-sponsored by three state chapters of the National Writing Project (NWP) for this coming summer to build curriculum that integrates *Queer of Color* literacies into their instruction in ways that are brave and sustainable.

Weaving our Stories Together: Toward Praxis of a Pedagogy of Coalitional Liberation

We have offered our stories not as a single narrative of what it means to be queer educators, as our lived experiences as white (and white-presenting) queer teachers affords us a level of security in our daily lives, as supported by a system of white body supremacy (Menakem, 2017). Across our three narratives, we collectively foreground our own understandings and enactments of restorative literacies in solidarity with our BIPOC and QTBIPOC students and the communities from which they join us. Through our stories, we provide three perspectives for what it means to have our own experiences and literacies represented (and not), and how (the lack of) representation has shaped our efforts as educators to provide further opportunities for forwarding pedagogies of coalitional liberation (Oviatt & Reid, 2021). We invite into our stories others who understand the need for not only recognizing the humanity of those who may (or may not) be different from themselves, but who also seek to dig deeper during precarious times.

Muñoz (1999, 2009) suggested a framework for queer futurity that is grounded in queer of Color politics and in doing so pushes us all to consider

in what ways we could thoughtfully resist both heteronormativity and racism. As teachers, we agree with Pritchard (2017) that resisting normative literacies is a necessary step toward situating our work within restorative literacies as movement toward liberation in classroom spaces. Thus, across our narratives we have shared our own struggles with finding ourselves of greater service to our students as we began to live into our own truths, highlighted the possibilities of moving from self-advocacy to beginning to serve our communities, and extending our work in communal advocacy as we continue the critical self-work and self-assessment that supports our ability to grow in our own servant leadership.

As mentioned earlier in this article, our stories highlight an ongoing journey of where we have been and where we have yet to grow. None of us can do this work in isolation, and coalition is absolutely necessary to move toward civic utopias. Therefore, we highlight the possibilities of engaging a pedagogies of coalitional liberation framework to support literacy teachers' ongoing journey through this current political moment and toward a future that is not yet here and now. We do so in much the same way we have moved across this article, through engaging critical conversation situated in the current moment, rooted in research, and moving toward critical self-reflection that makes room for reflexive and restorative practice that moves toward civic utopias. This is a journey, not a destination.

Fashioning a Bridge:

Toward Civic Utopias through Engaging Liberatory Praxis

By engaging the five tenets of pedagogies of coalitional liberation (Oviatt & Reid, 2021), teachers are supported in advocating for a broader understanding of whose literacies matter through: creating brave spaces, foregrounding collective power, valuing process over product, fostering youth's critical consciousness, and encouraging multimodal forms of expression. As reflected in our own narratives, above, we contend that this work begins with the self. As such, we do not offer practice for working with students, instead we offer suggestions for the kind of critical self-work that must be engaged before taking up restorative literacies and queer futurity in

classroom practice. We assert that a bridge toward that work is through a framing of pedagogies of coalitional liberation by starting with self, moving toward communal advocacy, and engaging with youth in the classroom and the community spaces that are already radically loving them.

Constructing Brave Space

Moving toward coalitional liberation begins when teachers “engage with youth in critical, collaborative conversation and brave space as central to the process of reading the word and the world” (Oviatt & Reid, 2021, p. 21). We wonder if this is possible prior to a teacher’s reading the word and the world through engaging in their own process of moving toward brave space in their own homes, departments, and professional and personal networks. Furthermore, we argue that the praxis necessary to move toward creating civic utopias through engaging restorative literacies and queer futurity cannot be fostered or maintained in a silo and suggest that teachers begin by asking themselves a simple, but not easy, question. How are you attending to creating brave spaces at home, work, and in your communities?

In Owen’s narrative, he speaks to the support of the community “that not only accepted my queerness but also encouraged it,” which facilitated his ability to “recognize my potential in many ways,” such as taking a leadership role within the campus’s student affiliate of NCTE. This move toward leadership became his own step into brave space, given that he had not served as a leader in the past but had rather kept his participation quiet and small in the town in which he had spent his childhood. Moreover, he encouraged his campus community to engage with YAL through an intersectional perspective that supported both anti-racism and resistance to cissexism and transphobia. Owen’s move into leadership and encouraging his community to engage with resistance to intersectional oppression can be seen as a willingness to construct brave space with an emphasis on queer futurity through restorative literacies alongside his campus community. We recognize that geographically, and especially during an era of an ongoing pandemic, this is not a simple

request. Yet, none of us can work toward creating or engaging civic utopias in a vacuum.

Foregrounding Collective Power

Our next tenet suggests that teachers “foreground identities and collective power” (Oviatt & Reid, 2021, p. 22). Where are you centering collective power in your classroom, department, and school district? Teachers must move toward engaging classroom spaces that are not simply democratized, but move us all a little closer to civic utopias. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers should be encouraged, inspired, and engaged to work in deeply coalitional communities.

Rae’s predisposition to working with and alongside community comes from experiences of having been a youth demonstrator and organizer. Across her personal story, she notes critical self-reflection of needed areas of growth that had previously not been clear, but through engaging community and foregrounding collective research with preservice teachers had become overwhelmingly apparent. She notes that this moved them all away from queer futurity, and this revelation spurred refocusing her commitments to race, genders, and sexualities justice across her work. Later in her narrative, she notes that this critical self-reflection and unlearning has led to new movements that support her further engagement in building toward foregrounding collective power through engagements with NCTE and NWP. The suggestion that teachers engage in coalitional work is a call for teachers to find larger networks that support their own development as iterative and ongoing. For example, organizations, such as NWP, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), regional serving chapters of the Library of Congress’s Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS), and state affiliates of NCTE, are all communities critically engaging across research and praxis. However, these organizations are a wonderful first step in moving toward community. None of these organizations is, within themselves, a place to stop growing, but rather communities to begin an ongoing and iterative journey of growth toward coalition building.

Valuing Process Over Product

In order for teachers to emphasize valuing “process over product” (Oviatt & Reid, 2021, p. 22), they must begin to do the work of critically self-reflecting on their ongoing growth. We would suggest that teachers begin their critical self-assessment through asking the following question. How are you valuing your own process and where are you seeking to grow?

Megan’s service is highlighted in her narrative as she shares that outside of her English classroom, she is also lifting students up through her work to co-advise the GSA and “advise the Diversity Club at my school.” She notes that “over 50” students at her middle school have attended the GSA this year. For Megan, this service work as a group adviser came after her own identification, in her adult years, as a part of the LGBTQ+ community. As she puts it, her childhood “environment was different; public acceptance of LGBTQ+ people was different; my understandings were VERY different,” and these early understandings meant that years were spent in moving toward a more honest expression of herself. Megan’s engagement with restorative literacies and queer futurity came later in life given the lack of engagement she notes with LGBTQ+ people in the public sphere. Though conservative policy makers would silence any mention of LGBTQ+ individuals, communities, and histories in the classroom and across schools, our voices are necessary to serve as models of powerful possibility for civic engagement to move toward civic utopias. Reflecting on Megan’s narrative, it is also apparent that her own growth into self could not have occurred without engaging critical self-assessment and continues to be a process.

In suggesting that teachers develop their own process of critical self-assessment, this is not meant to be a project of self-destruction, but rather deconstruction. This work begins with letting go of any assumption that there is a point of arrival. We are all learning and unlearning, every day. In this space between unlearning and learning, possibilities arise for fostering your own critical thinking and moving toward a space of critical consciousness. We cannot provide this space of pedagogical dexterity and the

ability to support others to sit in uncertainty unless we have first done so ourselves.

Fostering Youth’s Critical Consciousness

In order to “foster youth’s critical consciousness” (Oviatt & Reid, 2021, p. 22), we must be willing to make space for positioning ourselves as learners and sharing the classroom with our students as a space of participatory learning. However, before that move can be made, we would suggest that teachers begin with considering their own critical consciousness. Where are you fostering critical consciousness in yourself and with your colleagues? Teachers should engage their own critical consciousness before they can begin to do so in community with others.

Owen’s narrative supports the need for restorative literacies to be forwarded in our classroom spaces through inclusion of QTBIPOC YAL, not only for our queer of Color students but also for ourselves. He notes that he “was interested in what it meant for our group of mostly white, mostly straight pre-service teachers to reflect on our privilege of having books that represented our identities when we were in middle and high school.” Owen’s curiosity about the privilege of books being mirrors for those with identities that are overwhelmingly normalized across classroom spaces is in stark contrast to those of us who hold one or more historically marginalized identities. Situating literature as mirrors and windows is paramount to creating a more empathetic and engaged citizenry that moves us all closer to queer futurity by engaging restorative literacies.

Across this article, we have been intentional in our citationality and believe that reading through our reference list might be one way to begin engaging more deeply with the work that inspires us. However, that is not the only resource or the most accessible, and as such, we would recommend turning toward organizations that can be accessed online, such as: Abolitionist Teaching Network, Amplifier for Educators, Learning for Liberation, History UnErased, and Rethinking Schools. Many of these organizations can be engaged through video, audio, and art. The work that these spaces inspire should necessarily do dual duty by both fostering our own critical consciousness and inspiring us in bringing

multimodality into our classroom spaces. We must make space for both creativity and criticality.

Encouraging Multimodal Forms of Expression

The last tenet, encouraging multimodal forms of expression, suggests that teachers employ “a variety of modes as they co-construct products to engage their own renderings of civic engagement” (Oviatt & Reid, 2021, p. 22). There are a multitude of ways we can engage across modalities and arts, whether that happens through reading and sharing YAL literature from queer of Color authors, as suggested by Owen; engaging in multimodal curricula planning with currently serving and pre-service teachers rooted in queer theory and Queer of Color literacies, as Rae is enacting; or, as Megan notes, creating “pathways toward LGBTQ+ youth’s multimodal expressions of self.” We would strongly suggest you make time to explore your own creative endeavors. Extending Muhammad (2021), Pritchard (2017), and Munoz’s (2009) work without moving toward creativity and joy would be to miss the point entirely. During an era where harm and fatigue brought on by an ongoing pandemic and the silencing of histories, literacies, and voices spurred on by conservative policy makers finding joy may feel like an impossible task. Yet, we would argue that it is the only way any of us would be able to sustain ourselves in our efforts toward coalitional liberation. Therefore, with an eye toward taking care of self, we ask our most vital question yet. How are you making time to create? Moving toward civic utopias is always a work of creation and, therefore, creative expression. Do whatever you can to take care of yourself, and let’s work collectively to demand that these systems we work in begin to sustainably support us in doing so.

Conclusion

Across this article, we have elaborated on the need for moving from self-advocacy to communal advocacy by first engaging our own critical self-work and self-assessment. In order to engage this work, we ask that you stay present to the larger historical and current educational landscape of control through legislative educational gag orders. Moreover, we have noted these violent policies retract basic civic and human rights through silencing and erasure. Moving

toward civic utopias in an era where basic civic rights are threatened may seem like an impossible task. We bring together the important contributions of Pritchard (2017) and Muñoz (2009) by highlighting the need for movement toward restorative literacies through foregrounding empathy, accountability, humility, and intersectionality and engaging critical self-work and self-assessment.

We provide our own narratives of moving from self-actualization to communal advocacy as humanizing models of our own journeys of critical self-work in process. In order to begin to engage this necessary self-work, we suggest turning toward pedagogies of coalitional liberation as a framework for critical self-examination and self-assessment before turning toward models of what this framework could look like enacted in our classrooms. In closing, it is our hope that the contribution of this article will provide teachers of literacy with a way forward toward civic utopias in contentious times.

References

- Blackburn, M. (2005). Agency in borderland discourses: Examining language use in a community center with Black queer youth. *Teachers College Record*, 107(1), 89-113.
- H.B. 5097, 101st Michigan House of Rep. (2021). <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>
- Johnson, L. P. (2017). Writing the self: Black queer youth challenge heteronormative ways of being in an after-school writing club. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13-33.
- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation’s schools. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).
- Luneau, D. (2022, February 24). Breaking: Florida House of Representatives passes “stop woke act.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/breaking-florida-house-of-representatives-passes-stop-woke-act>
- Menakem, R. (2021). *My grandmother’s hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending*

our hearts and bodies. Penguin UK.

Muhammad, G. (2021). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.

Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics* (Vol. 2). U of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia*. New York University Press.

Oviatt, R. L., & Reid, S. F. (2021). Bounding our liberation together: Toward pedagogies of coalitional liberation. *Michigan Reading Journal*, 54(1), 8.

PEN America. n.d., (2022, February 25). Educational gag orders: Legislative restrictions on the freedom to read, learn, and teach. *PEN America*. Retrieved from <https://pen.org/report/educational-gag-orders/>

Pritchard, E. D. (2017). *Fashioning lives: Black queers and the politics of literacy*. SIU Press.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-428.

Turner, C. (2020, April 27). Court rules Detroit students have constitutional right to an education. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/27/845595380/court-rules-detroit-students-have-constitutional-right-to-an-education>



Dr. Rae L. Oviatt is an Assistant Professor at Eastern Michigan University. Rae's experiences as a youth demonstrator and organizer led her to a career in education. Over the last seventeen years, Rae has continued as a teacher-organizer working with and alongside youth in urban communities across the U.S.



Megan McElwee is an ELA teacher with seventeen years of teaching experience. Outside of classroom spaces her commitments to youth continue, as an advisor for her school's Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) and the Diversity Club. She recently presented at the Michigan Council of Teachers of English conference in 2021.



Owen Farney is a recent graduate of Central Michigan University and a teacher with Rockford Public Schools. His commitments to the profession include service as president of CMU's NCTE campus affiliate and as a writing consultant at CMU's writing center. As an honors student, Owen researched QTBIPOC stories in YAL.