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### We Are Each Other's Breath: Tracing Interdependency through Critical Poetic Inquiry

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**We Are Each Other's Breath:**  
**Tracing Interdependency through Critical Poetic Inquiry**

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### Abstract

In this paper, we utilize poetic methods that seek to surface, but not overdetermine, the unanticipated relational excess produced through literacy practices. Karen, a queer white woman, and Jordan, a cis-gendered heterosexual Black man, wrote a series of letters to one another throughout the Spring 2020 semester. We turned to critical poetic inquiry to analyze the letters, interested in poetry's capacity to highlight literacy's critical power *and* its emergent potential. We found ourselves implicated in each other's lives in new ways; we found our relationship both strengthened and tested. Such relational indeterminacy creates methodological challenges in literacy research. We found critical poetic inquiry to be a uniquely useful method for expressing the ambiguity and incommensurability of literacy as 'affective encounters' (Lenters, 2016), particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as our interdependency and mutual obligation is highlighted.

## Introduction

*Karen, this makes me wonder--*

*Jordan, I've been struggling--*

*What bothers me is--*

*We are all feeling--*

*I want to unpack the idea of love.*

This excerpt is taken from a poetic experiment that we (Karen and Jordan) fashioned from a series of letters we wrote throughout the Spring 2020 semester, during the initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, we had established separate but overlapping routines of teaching at the college level and attending courses in our doctoral program. These routines—commutes on subways and trains, late dinners and long conversations, class sessions that were variously invigorating and exhausting—were not merely disrupted by Covid-19; they were eradicated. In the ensuing months, we were suddenly unmoored: cut off from the generative possibilities of social engagement, missing the joys and impositions of being together with others, detached from the soothing daily rhythms that coalesced into our lives. We were frightened—the pandemic was, and is, terrifying—and we were lonely.

Our letters emerged from our shared desire to recapture some of what we missed from the causal exchanges and dinner dates of our past. We also wanted to use our time in quarantine for personal and collective reflection. To that end, we envisioned and structured our letters as a modified version of what Sealey-Ruiz (2020) calls an *archaeology of the self*, an individual process of surfacing individual bias and interrupting oppression actions. We were interested in how our different positionalities--Jordan identifies as a Black, cis-gendered, heterosexual man,

Karen as a queer white woman--inform our attitudes and experiences, especially during the pandemic.

However, as we wrote, we noticed that our letters were not only surfacing pre-existing personal and political histories; instead, the letters themselves *generated* unanticipated relational possibilities. We found ourselves implicated in each other's lives in new, sometimes exciting and sometimes unsettling, ways; we found our relationship both strengthened and tested. This should not have surprised us. Literacy has been theorized for decades as a social practice (NLG, 1996; Street, 1984), a tool through which people can collectively analyze and transform their social and political worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Morrell, 2008). However, recent theoretical interventions in queer theory (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 2009), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Clough, 2007; Massumi, 2015), posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2004), and new materialism (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010) have inspired literacy researchers to consider that 'this vision of [literacy as social] practice involves a domestication that subtracts movement, indeterminacy, and emergent potential' from literacy (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 24). Literacy is an event in which what is *produced* always exceeds what is *planned* (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Lenters, 2016).

This relational excess seemed particularly important in the context of the pandemic and the heightened attention to precarity it produced, as the ways in which we are literally implicated in one another's lives and deaths become more pronounced (we breathe each other's air; we live and die by this breath). The pandemic highlights how we are vulnerable to each other, where vulnerability 'names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives' (Butler & Yancy, 2020, p. 1). This interdependency exceeds any desire we may have for self-possessive autonomy and unfettered self-determination. Our letters forced us to consider how

Karen's whiteness, for instance, has always been implicated in Jordan's Blackness, and how Jordan's identity as a straight cis-gendered man is implicated in Karen's queerness. In very basic ways, we co-constitute each other.

We became increasingly interested in forms and methods that might allow us to heighten and extend that which was unanticipated in our exchanges—what else could we learn about our interdependency?—while retaining some of our original intentions to explore our incommensurable individual lives more deeply. We landed on a shared interest in critical poetic inquiry (Faulkner 2009; Perez, 2016). Poetry is a uniquely useful method for expressing the ambiguity and incommensurability of 'affective encounters' (Lenters, 2016). It allows for thematic and narrative coherence as well as sudden shifts in tone, juxtapositions of imagery, and a refusal of narrative sense, thus allowing us to 'work with complexity rather than seeking to order it through linear accounts' (Burnett & Merchant, 2018, p. 18).

In this paper, we explore the possibilities and challenges of critical poetic inquiry as a means through which to document the complexities of relationality—its incommensurabilities and interdependencies. We begin by explaining our respective theoretical commitments, investments that emerged from our individual positionalities and which we remained committed to drawing on throughout our joint project. Attention to these personal commitments was an important concession to the ways in which our lives *are* separate and incommensurable, even as they overlap and constitute each other in unexpected ways. We then situate ourselves in a 'critical-affective' legacy of literacy that understands literacy as a process of critical emergence. Finally, drawing on our own poetic project, we explore how critical poetic inquiry serves to document, highlight, and extend the complexities of relationality.

### **Theoretical Commitments**

Our theoretical commitments emerged from our individual positionalities. For Jordan, his position as a Black, cis-gendered, heterosexual man shaped his foundationally racialized experience of the world and his subsequent appreciation for Critical Race Theory. Karen's experience as a queer white woman led to her interest in surfacing and disrupting heteronormativity through queer theory. As well, her original interest in queer theory led her to explore related fields, particularly affect theory, given that 'fine-grained accounts of affect are really important for addressing a whole host of non-normative and minoritarian experiences, queer, trans, and otherwise' (Chinn & Love, 2012, p. 125) In this section, we explore our individual theoretical commitments in turn.

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Critical Race Theory has antecedents in the Critical Legal Studies Movement that started in the mid-1970s. Derek Bell, who was a Professor of Law at Harvard, was producing seminal works that helped start the movement: 'Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation,' (1976) and 'Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma' (1980). Bell questioned the treatment of people of color, specifically Black people, in these works and focused on the law's role in constructing and maintaining hierarchical and social control and subjugation. In other words, Bell's work raised awareness of and attempted to disrupt the further creation and maintenance of a legalized American racial caste system. Meanwhile, 'Fem-Crits' hosted the 1986 conference where they focused on feminist legal theory and its critique of the patriarchy, but they also asked several scholars of color to facilitate race centered conversations. This was the first time race was centered at a Critical Legal Studies (CLS) Conference. In the 1987 CLS conference, 'The Sounds of Silence,' racialism—a central concern of race crits—was introduced and defined: 'racialism

... refers to the theoretical accounts of racial power that explain legal and political decisions which are adverse to people of color as mere reflections of underlying white-interest' (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxiv). In other words, racial interests nor 'identity exist outside of or prior to law and are merely reflected in subsequent legal decisions adverse to non-whites' (p. xxiv).

More importantly, these works created the space for the radical shift in CLS and theory, for Derek Bell and several others hosted the first Critical Race Theory Conference at the St. Benedict Center in Madison, Wisconsin in 1989 (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). This was the official genesis of Critical Race Theory. This historic conference created space for Critical Race Theory scholars to come together in community and invent language and literature that centers race and made it a site worthy of legal, academic, and social interrogation, particularly in relation to race and power dynamics. The CLS conference's scholarly activity led to some of the most cited CLS and CRT works today, including Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory' (1991). Works such as hers are concrete examples as to how CRT allows for exposing and unpacking hidden and taken for granted assumptions in direct relation to understanding, assessing, and analyzing race, racialization, and privilege, in addition to illuminating and challenging race-centered exclusion practices.

### ***Queer Theory***

Queer theory emerged as feminist theorists were beginning to question the construct of stable identity categories (Callis, 2009; Love, 2011; Rubin, 1984). This was in part due to the influence of post-structuralism and post-modernism, movements that developed during the 1950s and 1960s and which also influenced queer theory (Britzman, 1995; McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Spargo, 2000). Both post-structuralism and post-modernism 'share a similar attitude



towards identity as fundamentally fragmentary, endlessly multiple and constantly deferred’ (Walton, 2012, as cited in McCann & Monaghan, 2020). In 1990, Theresa de Lauretis coined and ‘promoted the term [queer theory] for its capacity to trouble what she diagnosed as the built-in complacencies of lesbian and gay studies’ (Jagose, 2009, p. 157). That same year, Judith Butler published her book *Gender Trouble*, which argued that gender and sexuality were performative, rather than innate, and Eve Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she questioned binary assumptions about sexuality (Love, 2011). For these authors and subsequent theorists, *queerness* was related but not tethered to non-normative gender and sexuality: scholars used it to interrogate ‘all normative and non-normative acts, identities, desires, perceptions, and possibilities’ (Giffney, 2004, p. 74-75; see also Berlant & Warner, 1998; Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1993).

Beyond these academic predecessors, queer theory also emerged from legacies of gay, lesbian, and trans activism, particularly among people of color (Robinson and Hunter, 2019). Cohen (1997) argued that queer theory should acknowledge ‘the ways in which identities of race, class, and/or gender either enhance or mute the marginalization of queers, on the one hand, and the power of heterosexuals, on the other’ (p. 448). Meanwhile, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) posited ‘quare studies’ as a corrective to queer theory, whose emphasis on discourse could not account for his own embodied experience as a Black queer man. Ferguson (2004), recognizing the limitations of traditional queer theory in theorizing the experiences of people of color, developed ‘queer-of-color critique’ as a method through to critique heteronormativity in relation to nation formation and racialization. In these formulations, queer theory increasingly grappled with issues of intersectionality raised in critical race theory and Black feminism. Meanwhile, an increasing number of queer and queer-of-color theorists have engaged with affect (Ahmed, 2004; Halperin,

2002; Love, 2011) beginning with Sedgwick and Frank's (1995) foundational inquiry into shame.

Karen's commitments to queer theory and affect are thus not at all incompatible with Jordan's investment in critical race theory. In the next section, we conceptualize literacy from this 'critical-affective' perspective, drawing on a range of literacy scholars whose work has inspired us.

### **Approaches to Literacy**

Following our theoretical commitments, our understanding of literacy draws on socio-critical theories of literacy as well as posthuman, new material, and affective theories. Brian Street (1984) provided one of the earliest and most enduring conceptions of literacy as fundamentally social. Critiquing earlier theories of literacy that figured it as a 'technical and neutral skill,' and privileged writing over orality, Street (1984) suggested that literacy should be understood as 'culturally embedded' (p. 2). Following Street, members of the New London Group (1996) framed literacy practitioners as 'designers of our social futures' (p. 89), agentic individuals who could leverage relationships across difference to effect social change. This notion of literacy shifted the emphasis from literacy as autonomous and hegemonic to literacy as a mediating tool which practitioners use to their own ends. *Critical literacy* leverages this notion of the social to conceive literacy a practice through which people can collectively analyze and transform inequities in their social and political worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Morrell, 2008). Critical literacy has been defined as a way of 'reading the word and the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987): literacy provides people with tools for the 'critical navigation of hegemonic discourse' and the 'transformation of oppressive social structures' (Morrell, 2008, p. 5). Critical literacy intervenes importantly in social theories of literacy to recognize the ways in which

minoritized people, particularly racialized people, leverage literacies to effect change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kinloch, 2015).

However, these socio-critical conceptions of literacy, while key in resurfacing individuals as agentive practitioners, were critiqued for ‘exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes’ (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 338). Brandt and Clinton argued that this emphasis on local sites of literacy practice failed to account for literacy’s various capacities: ‘particularly, a capacity to travel, a capacity to stay intact, and a capacity to be visible and animate outside the interactions of immediate literacy events’ (p. 343). Aiming to restore the ‘thing-ness’ of literacy, Brandt and Clinton suggested that literacy exceeded the intentions and scope of the local, surviving and circulating beyond its initial site of production or consumption.

Following their intervention, *movement* became an increasingly important construct in conceptualizing literacy. In their review of ‘the changing social space of learning,’ Leander and colleagues (2010) sought to map the ‘messy circulations and plural geographies—complex mobilities of practices—[that] have always been on the move, however domesticated by our mappings of locales’ (p. 335). They argued that stark binaries between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices did not adequately address contemporary social practices of young people, particularly as virtual networking possibilities proliferated; indeed, networking became increasingly important in considering the mobility of literacies (Ehret & Hollett, 2014). In a related vein, Stornaiuolo and colleagues (2017) propose *transliteracies* as a framework for understanding how literacy functions as ‘the everyday activity of creating, maintaining, and disassembling associations across movements of people and things’ (p. 68). Across these theories, literacy was increasingly understood as emergent in its potential, grounded in the

material processes and practices of the human and more-than-human and unfolding in unpredictable ways.

In 2013, Leander and Boldt published their ‘field-defining’ (Snaza, 2020, p. 2) article that brought together critiques of social conceptions of literacy with the emerging field of affect theory. They argued that ‘the dynamic unfolding of living practices is dominated by a future conception of their desired results or effects, rather than through their affectivities in the dynamics of living practice’ (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 34). Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Brian Massumi’s conception of affect, Leander and Boldt found useful the idea of visioning literacy encounters as *assemblages* which, in contrast to the ‘social futures’ proposed by the NLG and related scholars, have ‘no natural directions of growth or boundaries or barriers’ (p. 25). From this perspective, *assemblage* refers to circulations of relations and intensities between and among the human and the more-than-human; they exceed what can be anticipated or planned for in any literacy event (Burnett & Merchant, 2018).

These theorists, who are broadly part of an ontological turn that seeks to decenter the human and the linguistic in the interest of capturing that which is dynamic, extra-discursive, and material in literacy encounters (Ehret & Leander, 2019; Lenters, 2016), argue that socio-critical literacies imagine literacy events as overdetermined by specific anthropocentric progressive social goals, invisibilizing the subtle and unpredictable lines of flight that flow from any literacy experience. Increasingly, work in this field also seeks to highlight and disrupt the narrow and colonial notions of the ‘human’ (Wynter, 2003) that structure anthropocentric approaches to literacy (Snaza, 2019; Tarc, 2015; Truman, 2016, 2019). In our own work, building on these important traditions, we have come to understand literacy as an ongoing process of *critical emergence*, ‘where intrahuman politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography shape the

conditions of emergence for literacy events that animate subjects and the political relations with which they are entangled' (Snaza, 2019, p. 4). In this sense, the literacy encounter is structured but not overdetermined by the material limits of local identities and practices.

### **Critical Poetic Inquiry: An Overview**

We thus sought a method for reading our letters that that would allow us to understand it is a dialogic process of critical emergence. Poetic inquiry, situated in literacy practice but also part of an arts-based research tradition that acknowledges the limits of linguistic ways of knowing (Eisner, 1997), struck us as a useful method for our work.

The earliest use of poetic inquiry as method in the social sciences is often attributed to sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992, 1993) who used poetic transcription to represent interview data of her participants (Prendergast, 2009). Arguing that prose representations conceal the constructedness of sociological knowledge, Richardson (1993) devised a poetic method in order to unsettle 'the deep, unchallenged constructedness of sociological truth claims' and to open 'the discipline to other speakers and ways of speaking' (p. 697). Eisner (1997) situated poetic methods as part of the larger arts-based movement proliferating in qualitative research, arguing that poetry, like other arts, 'evokes what cannot be articulated' (p. 5). Thus, poetic inquiry is founded in specific ontological understandings of the social world as *affective*, containing emotional valences among participants (and the researcher) that cannot be captured in traditional prose writing but that can be suggested in the evocative aesthetics of poetic craft (line breaks, figurative language, etc.)

These early interventions set the stage for a proliferation in poetic methods in the last two decades (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Butler-Kisber et. al., 2017; Faulkner, 2009; Prendergast, 2009). Though initially situated in post-structural and feminist theories and invested in unsettling the

supposed objectivity and neutrality of positivism and post-positivism (Hanauer, 2010), poetic inquiry has also more recently been utilized in conjunction with critical race theory (Perez, 2016), Black feminism (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Davis, 2019). In his exploration of how racist state violence is historicized, Jason Magabo Perez (2016) draws on poetic inquiry to develop a method he terms *critical race poetics*. This method is ‘a theoretically informed, experimental, qualitative research methodology that blends together narrative strategies of critical race theory and the poetry techniques of contemporary documentary poetics’ and is ‘grounded in the political goal of resisting and eradicating racist state violence’ (Perez, 2016, p. vii).

Ohito and Nyachae (2019) also use poetic inquiry for explicitly political purposes, aiming to surface and resist ‘Black women’s discursive subjugation’ (p. 839). Their work was inspired not only by previous researchers using poetic inquiry, but also Black feminist poets such as Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton, thus allowing them to draw on the scholarly legacy of poetic inquiry as qualitative method and the political legacy of Black feminist poetics. Similarly, Davis (2019) develops a culturally relevant method she calls *critical poetic inquiry*, which, she argues, unlike its predecessors of literary poetry and poetic inquiry, is ‘the process of using poetic devices to critically analyze a research inquiry to advance movement toward relevant forms of justice and produces research poetry as a product’ (p. 3). This justice-oriented approach explicitly addresses sociopolitical inequities by centering minoritized voices and acting as a counter-narrative to dominant discourse within and beyond the academy. Perez (2016), Ohito and Nyachae (2019), and Davis (2019) thus center and leverage the critical power of poetic inquiry to counter dominant racist discourses.

Critical poetic inquiry, the broad term we use here to invoke poetic inquiry that is explicitly justice-centered, is thus particularly well-suited to evoke, but not overdetermine, circulations of affective intensities, even as it retains its power to surface counter dominant discourses that produce racialized subjects.

### **An Experiment in Critical Poetic Inquiry**

We began our experiment by writing letters to one another. However, the effects of our critical literacy encounter quickly exceeded our intentions--our letters deepened and complicated our working relationship as we surfaced and shared our histories and reflections. What began as an exercise in self-exploration became the crafting of a new relationship through and with writing.

We were intrigued by the possibility of critical poetic inquiry as a means to underscore our critical intentions *and* to highlight that which was indeterminate and unplanned in our encounter. In this section, we analyze our use of this power in our poem, featuring key passages that showcase these various effects.

Our method consisted of the following steps:

- (1) We re-read our letters, picking out key lines and phrases that felt singularly important, particularly poetic or evocative, and/or relevant to our core themes: race, gender, sexuality, identity, education, and coronavirus
- (2) We went through these lines and arranged them according to the themes we wanted to convey, going back and picking other lines or fragments from our letters as we felt was necessary and discarding lines we had originally selected but that did not particularly suit our thematic purposes

- (3) We focused on arranging the stanzas so that they reflected a level of lyricism, curious about how sounds might allow us to connect otherwise disconnected ideas or words (i.e., rhyming community with humanity, etc.)
- (4) We read over the poem and added in stanzas or lines we felt were still necessary (for instance, Jordan wanted to include a bit that captured our intimacy and friendship more explicitly)
- (5) Then, once the poem was complete, we read back over it and analyzed it for themes and effects, both anticipated and unanticipated.

The poem is presented in full here, followed by our analysis. In the analysis, we consider both the aesthetic choices we made and the effects of these choices.

**Boldtype** = words Jordan used in his letters

Unbolded = words Karen used in her letters

*Italics* = source material taken from other texts (poems, songs, and scholarly literature)

***It was all good just a week ago; last week I had everything.***

**this crisis**

A global pandemic

**This covid-curse**

**ravaging all of our lives**

Forces us to recognize

or more strenuously deny

that *we are each other's harvest;*

*we are each other's business;*

*we are each other's magnitude and bond.*



**Karen, this makes me wonder--**

Jordan, I have been struggling--

**What bothers me is--**

We are all feeling--

**I want to unpack the idea of love.**

**Honestly, I'm scared.**

An investment in whiteness.

**Acquire land and control resources.**

Capital accumulation

*Constrains, transforms, or destroys*

*greater social wholeness.*

We are each other's spit.

We are each other's breath.

But whiteness functions like amnesia

**I rarely remember instances in classrooms**

**where I was made to think about my racial identity**

like erasure

**I recall taking courses about Shakespeare, Milton, Blake and Shelly**

like silence.

**In other words, we learn about race by not talking about it.**

I think of my great-grandfather, who renounced

I think of my grandfather, who never

I think of my parents, who

I think of myself

The disease sleeps in some of us without our knowing.

**Karen, this makes me wonder--**

Jordan, I have been struggling--

**What bothers me is--**

We are all feeling--

**I want to unpack the idea of love.**

**I felt alienated from my friends who lived in my neighborhood**

I was terribly shy

**those who didn't 'try hard' were where they should be**

The boys who lived in my neighborhood

would ride by on bikes and shout 'mute girl'

**In AP History I was one of three Black students in a class of thirty**

My high school served 3000 students; none of them were openly gay.

**I was an English major**

I searched for gay movies and books online

**No Black authors were featured**

How else would I have found them?

*It's been a long time,*

I worry about my former students

Whose lives did I put at risk?

*we shouldn't have left you*

We think we can master our students, control them

and the reality they will come to call their own

*without a dope beat to step to*

as their consciousness forms.

**Karen, this makes me wonder--**

Jordan, I have been struggling--

**What bothers me is--**

We are all feeling--

**I want to unpack the idea of love.**

Technology reproduces the 'cultural coding' that already exists.

**And I can no longer 'read the room.'**

**Is this what 21st century segregation will look like?**

**Digital forms of whiteness**

mediate, constrain, and construct

how students will interact with curriculum

and with each other.

**Colorblind rhetoric and *the need to be master,***

**Invisible academic invaders,**

**Perpetuate visible, palpable, and invisible oppression.**

Intimate experiences, the basis for closeness

can be deeply rewarding

and deeply uncomfortable.

**In the classroom**

**We can eagerly or trepidatiously inquire about one another**

Intricate invisible systems

connect us like veins.

Whiteness wants

To deny these intimacies.

Whiteness has

**Chosen not to engage.**

**Karen, this makes me wonder--**

Jordan, I have been struggling--

**What bothers me is--**

We are all feeling--

**I want to unpack the idea of love.**

*Abolitionists formed communities*

*ripe with coalitional possibility*

attuned to the ways in which we relate  
 to ourselves,  
 to each other,  
 to land, to labor.

**People have established foundations of love**

**in their connections to people, animals, and so much more**

*These performances of collectivity*

*Nurture the love and joy of people*

*in search of their full humanity.*

More than ever, we need to recognize our social bonds, our relationality,  
 the ways in which we need each other

**Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling**

**when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs**

we exchanged intimacies

we would have been too scared or shy or awkward to admit in person

**Your checking in on me and facetimeing me really help me**

Thank you, again, for sharing your writing with me

These conversations are helping me through this, and I mean that.

**Aaaahhhhhh!!! I miss you.**

**I want to discuss you right now:**

**How are you? Like seriously, how is your world?**

I am left with more questions than answers, as usual.

**I love the intimate relationships you're developing with your students.**

This accessibility ... is part of what defines our humanity.

**Thank you for your willingness to be vulnerable**

**I really appreciate how you shared your extremely personal story**

to what extent do these experiences,

*can* these experiences, be reproduced or facilitated?

**that something is what I think about**

**in racial literacy development and pedagogical practices**

there are forms of trust and intimacy that can be developed

**one that has a foundation of critical love.**

This is a small ritual

I hope to explore:

trusting students, inherently and unconditionally

**creating collective classroom communities**

**becoming agents of change**

**Karen, this makes me wonder--**

Jordan, I have been struggling--

**What bothers me is--**

We are all feeling--

**I want to unpack the idea of love.**

Sending much love, Jordan

**I love you so much Karen**

**Reading Beyond the Lines: Analyzing Our Poetic Experiment**

*Intertextual and Polyvocal*

Scholars have noted that poetic inquiry allows for polyvocality (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019; Gorlich, 2016; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018; Pithouse-Morgan et. al., 2014) as well as intertextuality (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019). We leveraged this possibility for multiple voices in creating our found poem, scavenging the letters indiscriminately: throughout, we had discussed memories; Karen quoted her favorite poets, Jordan his favorite rappers; and we both drew on scholarly literature. The poem itself is thus an entanglement of our own words and those of our poetic and scholarly predecessors. Our opening stanza showcases this polyvocal, intertextual method: we open with Jay-Z's mournful reflection from 'A Week Ago'--which Jordan also used as the opening line of his first letter--and then draw on our own reflections on the pandemic that suddenly and drastically changed the way we live, before closing the stanza with lines from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem 'Paul Robeson.' In this stanza, we test the potential and limits of art to speak beyond its historical and thematic context (see Brandt & Clinton, 2002). We also demonstrate our commitment to utilizing a range of source, using a 'scavenger methodology' that does not discriminate by genre, author, or discipline (Halberstam, 1998). Jay-Z's lyrics speak to the individual nature of loss, even as Brooks asserts our connectedness, and Jordan and I connect these two disparate speakers through coronavirus. This tension--between the self and the collective--is one that we continue to highlight throughout the poem, and certainly one that coronavirus has highlighted.

In a later stanza, we layer our voices to juxtapose our childhood experiences:

**I felt alienated from my friends who lived in my neighborhood**

I was terribly shy

**those who didn't 'try hard' were where they should be**

The boys who lived in my neighborhood

would ride by on bikes and shout 'mute girl'

**In AP History I was one of three Black students in a class of thirty**

My high school served 3000 students; none of them were openly gay.

**I was an English major**

I searched for gay movies and books online

**No Black authors were featured**

How else would I have found them?

As a young Black boy, Jordan's placement in elite classes marked him and alienated him from his friends and neighbors; for Karen, meanwhile, a vague sense of unease (that later coalesced into a queer identity) resulted in a self-imposed isolation. Without collapsing the particulars of our experiences, our voices combine here to create a common thread of alienation. We were also united in a search for texts that would mirror our experiences. Jordan's failure to find Black authors highlights what was 'unthought' (Lowe, 2015) in Karen's search for queer movies and books--it did not even occur to her that all of the representation she sought, and found, featured white characters. This also raises, subtly, the point that Jordan didn't explicitly mention, that none of the Black authors he eventually encountered were coded as gay or wrote about gay experiences. Rather than one of us speaking back to a dominant discourse, our threads instead each serve as counter-narratives to the other's (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

By combining our own voices, and those of other scholars and poets, we were able to locate and highlight common themes while maintaining an ethic of incommensurable sociality



(Muñoz, 2009), as well to reinforce but also potentially correct for the narrowness of our individual positionalities.

***Non/linear and In/coherent***

We pieced this poem together in a collage-like fashion (Franklin-Phipps & Rath, 2018), interested in how poetry allows for both traditional narrative and for a nonlinear, incoherent experience. This was important to us as we tested the limits and possibilities of both critical agency and the ‘lines of flight’ that emanate from any given encounter. How might we simultaneously honor and undermine our own attempts at narrative agency and authorial control?

This possibility is particularly salient in the following excerpt:

***It's been a long time,***

I worry about my former students

Whose lives did I put at risk?

***we shouldn't have left you***

We think we can master our students, control them

and the reality they will come to call their own

***without a dope beat to step to***

as their consciousness forms.

Here, we drew out several strands: first, Jordan’s light-hearted reference to an Aaliyah song, which he quoted after it had taken him a few days to respond to Karen’s letter; second, Karen’s expressed fears about coronavirus (‘Whose lives did I put at risk?’) and its impact on her former students; and finally, her reflections on the relations of dominance she enacted on those students. These moments are temporally isolated (coronavirus is recent; she taught high school years ago) and thematically unrelated, but combined, they tell a new story. This creates a

narrative arc, but one that is quite unlike what either Karen or Jordan ‘meant’ in their original use of these words. Instead, we tell a different story, one Karen could not have told on her own, in which the song lyrics speak to a broader and unacknowledged problem in her teaching: she didn’t just try to ‘control’ her students, she also may have failed to provide them with a the kind of ‘dope beat’--that is, the art, the literature, the music, the texts--that were part of their cultures and identities. Though this stanza suggests a relatively stable narrative, it is created through the juxtaposition of disconnected text.

We also rely on incoherence at key moments, particularly in the hook or chorus that we return to throughout this poem. This series of interruptions, aside from their evocative ambiguity (which we discuss in the next section) is meant to be disorienting compared to the generally coherent stanzas and to showcase the jagged edges of incommensurable sociality (Muñoz, 2009). In this chorus, we address each other and interrupt each other; we speak for ourselves and for an ambiguous collective. This fast-paced litany of emotional experiences--wondering, struggling, bothering, and feeling--highlights the ways in which we do and do not listen to each other, the ways in which individual experience might serve to eclipse an encounter with another. This incoherence is meant to mirror the overlapping interruptions of actual conversations. With letters, we can each exist in the belief that our words are heard, or read. This poem refuses that comfortable fiction and points to another reality--that we often do not listen, or skim each other’s words. We remind ourselves, in this chorus, that encounters do not necessarily proceed in the ways in which we hope they do.

### ***Evocative and Ambiguous***

Poetic inquiry has been lauded for its ability to evoke what cannot be expressed in traditional scholarly prose (Eisner, 1997; Prendergast et. al., 2009; Richardson, 1993). The

chorus, for instance, is purposefully ambiguous, that is, cutting off each sentence (except the final line) so that the specific content about which we struggle and wonder is left unsaid. In many ways, of course, we were worried and struggling with so much during the coronavirus that any complete sentence cannot fully articulate that experience, and indeed, any given attempt to do so automatically narrows the scope of that experience. This is the common belief of affect theory, which counts experience as pre-linguistic and necessarily reduced by any kind of linguistic representation (Massumi, 1995, 2002). The gaps created by interruption thus leaves open what is normally reduced by language, performing their own kind of literacy (Truman et. al., 2020). We strategically deployed the ambiguity of incomplete sentences here to evoke the vast range of issues that we might be struggling with and feeling about, given the current pandemic and our own positionalities.

We also play with the emergent potential of silence in the stanza about Karen's ancestors, which begins with Jordan's sentence: 'In other words, we learn about race by not talking about it.' Following Jordan's insight, we layer Karen's comments about her ancestors and herself--we show, in real time, the effects of 'not talking about it.' What did Karen's great-grandfather renounce, exactly? The truth is probably far more nuanced and broader than she can understand and therefore name. The silence evokes not the particular repudiations that her family members made in becoming white, but a *range* of possible repudiations. In the final line, we return to a comment about coronavirus, but in this context, Karen becomes implicated in the legacy of white supremacy, whether she knows it or not. Her original meaning is subverted and works in a new way.

## **Conclusion**

We are something other than “autonomous” in such a condition, but that does not mean that we are merged or without boundaries. It does mean, however, that when we think about who we “are” and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one meaning of “incorporation”), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded. (Butler, 2004, p. 27-28)

Our experiment in critical poetic inquiry has been an experiment in recognizing how we are ‘periodically undone,’ not ‘merely bounded beings’ but also not ‘without boundaries.’ By engaging with poetry’s capaciousness as an intertextual, polyvocal, non/linear, in/coherent, evocative, and ambiguous form, we explore literacy’s capacity to showcase this interdependency. Our crafting and subsequent analysis of a poem allowed us to consider more deeply how literacy can both reinforce *and* de-stabilize our sense of ourselves as agentic, self-possessed subjects. Our found poem allowed us to decontextualize and re-contextualize our own words in a way that built on our critical intentions *and* subverted these intentions, allowing them to emerge in new directions. Indeed, poetry is particularly well-suited to honor and/or subvert authorial intention. This is important because our identities are not singular, and our own voices are at times minoritized and at times dominant, depending on the context.

Poetry does not allow us to evade our identities entirely; nor does it ignore the ways in which our subjectivities exceed essentialist notions. Poetry, especially poetry that embraces polyvocality and intertextuality, demonstrates that we are undeniably in relation, and that this relation is dependent in part upon our position in various power structures, countering *individualist* notions of the subject. Moreover, poetry can serve as an antidote to *ahistorical*

renditions of the subject: its condensed form allows for temporal layering to showcase historical patterns. In a poem, we can layer Jordan's cultural alienation in schools with Karen's failures to serve her Black and Brown students. Finally, poetry allows for silence and ambiguity in ways that traditional prose does not. By making space for the unsaid and unthought--not by naming it, but by leaving open what is unnamed--poetry allows us to honor the capaciousness of the possible, countering the idea that there exists a fully knowable or *transparent* subject (Da Silva, 2007). The subject in literacy exceeds the knowable, and silence and evocative ambiguity showcases this irreducibility to legibility.

We argue that this method—and others that aim to document the multiple possibilities of literacy practice and the complex ways in which literacy practitioners are mutually constituted—is essential as we work to theorize and study literacy in ways that do justice to its richness. While we focused on particular aspects of critical poetic inquiry and on its power to counter individualist, ahistorical, and transparent notions of the subject in literacy, there is untapped potential in poetry, and other methods, to evoke and challenge other issues of subject, representation, power, and possibility in literacy practice.

Critical poetic inquiry also worked to showcase our academic collaboration, a process that is traditionally obscured by a final product. Traditional academic prose is singularly voiced and straightforward, failing to capture both the polyvocal process and the tensions that undoubtedly arise in collaborative efforts--tensions that, rather than hidden, we suggest, might be surfaced and acknowledged in ways that ultimately make knowledge production more powerful. Not all of these collaborations must rely on poetry, of course. We encourage scholars to explore a range of representational practices that serve to highlight, rather than obscure, the ways in which knowledge is always collaborative.

Of course, as we have mentioned, our letters together totaled over 50 pages. Our poem simply could not capture every nuance and detail of this ‘data set.’ Since we were the researcher-participants in this study, we felt comfortable selecting certain words and leaving out others. However, in a larger study, with more participants, how would we negotiate this tension? What words are selected in the poem, and which are dismissed? Who decides? This process could and perhaps should be collaborative, not only to be ethical, but to address more fully the tension and mess of sociality inherent in any academic collaboration between and among researchers and participants. Also, poetry remains a very linguistic-centric method, and if we take seriously affect theory’s notion that some experiences cannot be captured in language, it may make sense to pursue arts-based methods beyond those that are linguistic, as well. Therefore, two possible future directions include exploring other arts-based methods and tackling larger collaborations.

However, this method is not merely important for representational purposes; in foregrounding interdependency, it highlights ethical questions about our responsibilities to one another. This is especially important in the time of Covid-19, as a pandemic ravages the globe—but not, importantly, ravaging all of us equally, as those who are Black, Brown, and poor are disproportionately impacted (Butler & Yancy, 2020). Literacy that encourages us be ‘open to becoming unbounded’ (Butler, 2004, p. 28) asks us, in turn, to consider more expansively our responsibilities: literacy in this sense serves as ‘a summons to care for... the complex, more-than-human relations that make up worlds’ (Snaza, 2020, p. 4). Critical poetic inquiry requires us to think capaciously (Snaza, 2020; Truman et al., 2020) about the conditions that create a sense of ourselves as ahistorical, separate, and knowable individuals, and it *troubles* this sense by suggesting that we are implicated in one another. In exploring how ‘I’ becomes ‘I,’ critical poetic inquiry also unsettles this ‘I’ and asks us to confront the challenges of becoming ‘we.’

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